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HELP SEEKING IN THE NEW ZEALAND
DEFENCE FORCE USING THE THEORY OF
PLANNED BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract

Mental health is of utmost importance in military settings due to the demanding and often dangerous nature of the work involved. However, military personnel are disproportionately deterred from seeking mental health help when the need arises. Perceived stigma and structural barriers to help seeking have been widely researched in military settings, however, results are often mixed. The current study examined the traditional stigma and structural barriers help seeking model alongside an alternative model of the Theory of Planned Behaviour to explain help seeking behaviour. A cross-sectional study design surveying 2633 enlisted New Zealand Defence Force Personnel was carried out. Within the two models, attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, stigma, and structural barriers were assessed as predictors of intentions to seek professional help for mental health problems. The Theory of Planned Behaviour model accounted for 26% of total variance in help seeking intentions, while the traditional model only accounted for 7%. Additionally, the Theory of Planned Behaviour model showed potential for its capacity to include stigma and structural barriers as antecedents to its core predictors, with stigma being partially mediated by attitudes, and structural barriers being fully mediated by perceived behavioural control.

Additional group level measures were also considered in relation to help seeking intentions which highlighted at risk groups. A common theme arose across these groups of less chances for both formal and informal learning opportunities about mental health help seeking in the defence force. Using these group level differences, recommendations for how the Theory of Planned Behaviour can be utilized to increase mental health learning experiences for the New Zealand Defence Force personnel are made. Specifically, the potential efficacy of incorporating the sharing of highly ranked personnel's positive experiences of help seeking early on in new recruits training.

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Author

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