Multi-theory Model (MTM) as a Predictor of Mental Health-related Treatment Seeking Behavior: The Use of Telehealth During COVID-19

Dallon T. Richards, Honors Public Health
University of Arkansas

Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened psychological distress, particularly in high-risk, college student populations, and required prioritization of telehealth-based care. Help-seeking is critical for harm reduction but understanding the rapid shift to telehealth services is further obscured by significant perceived and definite behavior barriers to utilization. Although telehealth services improve access to care and are perceived positively by college students, a prevalence of untreated mental health disorders remains. The objective of this study was to identify psycho-social and behavioral correlates of telehealth-based, psychological help-seeking among college students and investigate the efficacy of the Multi-theory Model of health behavior change (MTM) (Figure 1) in predicting initiation and sustenance of tele-health treatment seeking behavior.

MTM Rationale
The MTM is the only health behavior theory specifically targeted at health behavior change. The MTM consists of two components: initiation (one-time health behavior change) and sustenance (long-term continuation of a health behavior). This distinction is important for operationalizing these components independently. Help behavior initiation is determined by participatory dialogue (advantages minus disadvantages), behavioral confidence, and changes in the physical environment. Sustenance of a health behavior is determined by emotional transformation, practice for change, and changes in the social environment. The MTM is ideal for assessing tele-health treatment seeking behavior due to its previously demonstrated effectiveness for predicting help behavior changes across global demographics.

Methodology
College students (n = 328) were randomly recruited to participate in this cross-sectional study. Participants completed an electronic questionnaire assessing demographic information, substance use, mental health status, perceptions of stress and stigma, and at least one previously validated screener for suicidality. Scales included: PHQ-4, AUDIT-C, Perceived Stress Scale, self-stigma for Seeking Help Scale, and previously validated screeners for suicidality. Bivariate analysis and hierarchical multiple regression modeling tested the MTM's predictability and the significance of psycho-social and behavioral variables.

Results
Approximately 70% of participants had a perceived need for formal help due to psychological distress. Additionally, 38.7% reported suicidal ideation, 56.1% and 43.3% screened positive for anxiety and depression, respectively. Anxiety, depression, and suicidality were significantly correlated with perceived and definite help-seeking behavior for the MTM. Participants seeking psychological help perceived significantly higher advantages related to formal help-seeking, greater confidence to get help via telehealth, greater ability to emotionally direct themselves toward telehealth help-seeking, and higher perceived need for formal help via telehealth. For the MTM, participants seeking psychological help perceived significantly higher advantages related to formal help-seeking, greater confidence to get help via telehealth, greater ability to emotionally direct themselves toward telehealth help-seeking, and higher perceived need for formal help via telehealth than those who did not seek help via telehealth. Future behavioral interventions should, at a minimum, assess behavioral confidence and consider individuals’ perceived advantages and disadvantages prior to implementation. Findings from this research will be useful in creating psycho-social and behavioral strategies for programs targeted at increasing tele-health-based psychological help-seeking in college student populations. Self-stigma is also a significant determinant of tele-health treatment seeking behavior that requires further research. Future MTM studies should use a prospective study design to effectively measure construct predictability for actual behavior versus mere intent.

Discussion
The MTM effectively conceptualizes tele-health-based treatment-seeking among college students with psychological distress. Future behavioral interventions should, at a minimum, assess behavioral confidence and consider individuals’ perceived advantages and disadvantages prior to implementation. Findings from this research will be useful in creating psycho-social and behavioral strategies for programs targeted at increasing tele-health-based psychological help-seeking in college student populations. Self-stigma is also a significant determinant of tele-health treatment seeking behavior that requires further research. Future MTM studies should use a prospective study design to effectively measure construct predictability for actual behavior versus mere intent.

Key References

Approximately 70% of participants had a perceived need for formal help due to psychological distress. Additionally, 38.7% reported suicidal ideation, 56.1% and 43.3% screened positive for anxiety and depression, respectively. Anxiety, depression, and suicidality were significantly correlated with perceived and definite help-seeking behavior for the MTM. Participants seeking psychological help perceived significantly higher advantages related to formal help-seeking, greater confidence to get help via telehealth, greater ability to emotionally direct themselves toward telehealth help-seeking, and higher perceived need for formal help via telehealth. For the MTM, participants seeking psychological help perceived significantly higher advantages related to formal help-seeking, greater confidence to get help via telehealth, greater ability to emotionally direct themselves toward telehealth help-seeking, and higher perceived need for formal help via telehealth than those who did not seek help via telehealth. Future behavioral interventions should, at a minimum, assess behavioral confidence and consider individuals’ perceived advantages and disadvantages prior to implementation. Findings from this research will be useful in creating psycho-social and behavioral strategies for programs targeted at increasing tele-health-based psychological help-seeking in college student populations. Self-stigma is also a significant determinant of tele-health treatment seeking behavior that requires further research. Future MTM studies should use a prospective study design to effectively measure construct predictability for actual behavior versus mere intent.