

FINDING SPACE TO MENTAL HEALTH



Promoting mental health in adolescents (12-14 year-olds): Development and evaluation of an intervention

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INTRODUCTION

Young people are an important target population for mental health promotion (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson & Ciarrichi, 2005; WHO, 2010), and stigma reduction (Corrigan & Watson, 2007).

In fact, 1 in 5 adolescents will experience a mental disorder (WHO, 2001), which demands from them the capacity to understand mental health issues, and be able to seek for help (Kelly, Jorm & Wright, 2007). However, evidence suggests that mental health stigmatizing beliefs arise at an early age, having a disseminating impact (European Commission & Portuguese Health Ministry, 2010), and compromising their behavior towards mental illness.

It is known that people who are fearful of those who are perceived as mentally ill, have incorrect beliefs about the effectiveness of treatment interventions, are often reluctant to seek help for mental disorders and are not sure how to help others (Jorm, 2000; Bourget Management Consulting for the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health, 2007).

In this way, interventions focusing on promoting *mental health literacy*, which combines adequate knowledge and beliefs regarding mental health issues (Jorm, 2000), are fundamental for the recognition, management and prevention of mental illness (Kelly, Jorm & Wright, 2007).

Poor mental health literacy and stigma are considered the major barriers to mental health promotion (WHO, 2002).

School-based interventions have become an essential strategy (Massey, Armstrong, Boroughs, Henson & McCash, 2005). Internationally, several mental health promotion and anti-stigma programmes have been launched (Wyn, Cahill, Holdsworth, Rowling & Carson, 2000; MINDSET, 2002; Stuart, 2006; Tacker & Dobie, 2008).

In Portugal, there is only one systematic school-based intervention in this area, named *UPA Makes the Difference*, which aims to contribute to the increase of mental health literacy, amongst young people (15-18 year-olds). Preliminary results (N=232 students) showed a significant increase of knowledge perceptions and positive perceptions towards mental health problems (Campos, Palha, Dias, Veiga, Sousa Lima, Costa & Duarte, 2011).

OBJECTIVES

This project aims to provide a contribution in mental health promotion area by:

- 1) Developing a rigorous assessment instrument capable of assessing mental health literacy and stigmatized perceptions towards mental disorders, and also to work as an outcome measure on the intervention
- 2) Developing an intervention intended to be effective in enhancing knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of 12-14 year-olds students, attending 7th, 8th and 9th grades, in relation to mental health issues ("mental health literacy" and mental illness stigmatizing perceptions)
- 3) Implementing and evaluating the intervention's effectiveness



Finding Space to Mental Health follows 4 major steps such as:

- 1) development of the assessment instrument and development of the intervention
- 2) implementation of a pilot-study
- 3) implementation and study of intervention's effectiveness
- 4) follow-up

METHOD

1 In order to **develop an assessment instrument** tailored towards measuring the different components of "mental health literacy" and stereotypes associated with mental illness in adolescents and their needs for mental well-being interventions, focus groups discussions with students (n=30) of the same age group as those to whom the intervention is aimed will be developed. The focus groups will discuss participants' understanding of mental health, knowledge about mental disorders and possible mental illness stereotypes, worries and concerns that may be signs of a mental health problem, and how to seek help if needed.

The **development of the two-day intervention** aimed at promoting mental health literacy and reducing stigmatized perceptions towards mental disorders among young people will be based on two sets of information: a) the understanding of the needs of Portuguese young people, assessed throughout the focus groups; and b) the review of existing school-based interventions, their procedures, materials, and validated practices. The intervention will be carried out in two sessions, lasting two hours each, and implemented in two consequent weeks. The methodology will be based in dynamic group activities, using appealing materials (e.g. music, videos) to facilitate student's engagement.

2 The **pilot-study** aims to test the suitability of the intervention program and of the assessment instrument. The study will be carried out involving 30 school-aged children (12-14 year-olds) attending 7th to 9th grades. Written informed consent to participate in the study will be asked to the students and to their parents.

First, participants will respond to the assessment instrument (pre-test assessment) and to a sociodemographic questionnaire. Second, the intervention program (two sessions, in two weeks) will be carried out; when the second intervention session is completed, the assessment instrument will be administered again (post-test assessment).

3 For the **implementation and study of the intervention's effectiveness** (3) a convenience sample of 22 classes (around 450 students) will be used, 7th to 9th grades, from 8 schools of the North of Portugal. Written informed consent to participate in the study will be asked to the students and to their parents.

First, all the participants of each class will respond to the assessment instrument (pre-test assessment). Then, the classes will be randomly assigned in two experimental conditions (experimental group and control group). Second, the intervention program (two sessions in two weeks) will be carried out with the 11 classes assigned to the experimental group. Third, when the second intervention session is completed, the scale will be administered again to the two groups (post-test assessment).

4 Finally, a 6-month **follow-up** assessment will be conducted including both groups.