

July 2023

The Sources of Strength Australia project

Funder: CRESP, NHMRC
CRESP stream: Schools



Research aims

The Sources of Strength Australia project was a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to assess whether Sources of Strength — a universal, school-based suicide prevention program — increased help-seeking intentions (**primary aim**) and help-seeking behaviour, attitudes and norms; referral of distressed peers; availability of adult help; positive coping; and reduced suicidal behaviour (**secondary aims**).

Overview

Adolescence and young adulthood are characterised by increased mental health risks — globally, 1 in 7 young people aged 10–19 experiences a mental disorder¹, and in Australia, suicide remains the leading cause of death among those aged 15–24².

Intervening early is crucial to supporting young people to navigate what can be a challenging period in their lives. Given the quantity of time that adolescents spend in formal education, schools can play an important role in supporting young people to identify, address and seek support for a range of mental health issues.

Sources of Strength is a school-based suicide prevention program that draws on the power of peer leadership and social connectedness. Developed in the United States, Sources of Strength has previously been shown to be effective in both preventative upstream and intervention outcomes. By investigating the program's impact on students' help-seeking intentions and behaviours, a research team led by the Australian National University sought to expand the evidence base underpinning Sources of Strength and explore its potential for implementation in Australia.

¹Mental health of adolescents. World Health Organisation, 2021.

²Deaths by suicide among young people. AIHW, retrieved July 2023.

Lived experience input

The Sources of Strength Australia project was characterised by the use of trained peer leaders at each school who promoted and modelled help-seeking behaviour and positive communication. While peer leaders weren't screened for lived experience of suicide or mental ill health, their lived experience of being young people in a school environment equipped them with important insights into how best to deliver the key messages of the Sources of Strength program in ways that were likely to resonate with their peers.

Program timeline

1 Randomised controlled trial (2015–2019)

2 Data analysis (2020 onwards)

Research activities

Phase 1: Randomised controlled trial (2015–2019)

The research team led a two-arm, cluster-randomised controlled trial of the Sources of Strength program that had been adapted for use in an Australian context. A total of 1,633 students in years 7–10 at 13 schools across the ACT and NSW participated in the trial. Seven schools were randomised to the Sources of Strength intervention and six to a waitlist control group.

Peer leaders from each of the seven intervention condition schools received training in the Sources of Strength program and were supported by adult advisors to deliver positive messaging to their student peers via class presentations, posters, videos and social media communications over a two-year period. Messages were focused on encouraging help-seeking behaviours, as well as on enhancing positive coping skills and strengthening communication pathways between young people and trusted adults.

Students were encouraged to identify and access eight specific sources of strength:



Researchers collected data on help-seeking intentions and other study outcomes at four time points (pre-intervention, after the initial three months of messaging, and at the end of the first and second year of the program's implementation). Students and staff who had been randomised to the intervention group also provided qualitative insights into their experiences and perceived impacts of the program.



Phase 2: Data analysis (2020 onwards)

The program data showed that Sources of Strength had no significant impact on students' help-seeking intentions after program completion. However, qualitative insights from the research revealed that both staff and students in the intervention group believed that the program had increased awareness of, and openness to, help-seeking within their school community, and that it had enabled a common language that helped people talk more openly about suicide and mental health.

The study also produced important findings about personality factors associated with suicide — specifically, that feelings of hopelessness were associated with double the risk of suicidal thoughts and plans, and that they increased the odds of a suicide attempt by 45%. Further, impulsivity and sensation seeking were associated with suicidal ideation, and impulsivity was associated with suicide attempt.

Impact

This research adds to the international evidence base that underpins the Sources of Strength program. While the data didn't support the use of Sources of Strength to increase help-seeking intentions among high school students, supplementary findings from the study support the value of peer-led programs in addressing mental health and suicide risk among young people, offering new opportunities to better identify those at risk of suicide and contribute to a growing evidence base that looks at the link between personality traits and suicide.

The work also highlighted the importance of equipping adults with the skills to support young people in distress. This led to the development of a new CRESO resource that will prepare parents to recognise and respond if their children show signs of, or disclose, mental ill health or suicidal thoughts or behaviours.

Research team

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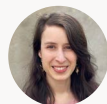
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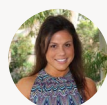
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Publications

Calear, A. L., Morse, A. R., Christensen, H., McCallum, S., Werner-Seidler, A., Alexander, R., & Batterham, P. J. (In press). Evaluating suicide attitudes and suicide literacy in adolescents. *Journal of Mental Health*.

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The Centre of Research Excellence in Suicide Prevention (CRESP) is a collaborative program led by Black Dog Institute that aims to reduce the suicide rate in Australia.

