

# FROM STORMY SEAS TO SMOOTH SAILING

Young Australians are most at risk of experiencing poor mental health, yet less than half will seek help.

Experts agree that poor mental health is the leading health issue among Australian youth. Half of all mental illnesses emerge in the teenage years, and suicide is the most common cause of death for Australians aged between 15-44 years.

Despite considerable national investment in new models of face-to-face care, many adolescents fail to access these in times of need.

Dr Bridianne O'Dea, a Research Fellow at the **Black Dog Institute, UNSW**, believes we need to deliver more accessible solutions that incorporate teenagers' own needs and preferences.



>> Pictured above  
Dr Bridianne O'Dea from  
Black Dog Institute, UNSW

"The symptoms of poor mental health can be masked, with many youths unaware that they may be experiencing the onset of a mental illness. They may also be ashamed or scared to admit that they are feeling different."

Geographical isolation, financial hardship, long wait lists, stigma, and lack of expertise also inhibit help-seeking.

"Few services are designed to proactively 'reach out' to youth; instead these services are like a shopfront waiting for adolescents to self-identify and present," Dr O'Dea says.

"Importantly, young people have a desire to solve their problems on their own. Despite having supportive family or friends, young people wish to have autonomy over their decision-making, and often prefer to seek help in anonymous ways including online."

## USING TECHNOLOGY TO DETECT AND DELIVER

***[Smooth Sailing] is similar to a virtual clinic, so young people can access the service from any internet-enabled device, assess their state of mind, and be immediately connected to tailored treatment strategies***

Technology-based mental health care, or e-mental health, has rapidly grown in both sophistication and popularity over the last decade, and Australia is a global leader in the field.

As more standalone e-mental health programs are developed, there is now a need for researchers to bring them together into a holistic and streamlined approach.

This opportunity has driven Dr O'Dea and the Digital Dog Research Team at the Black Dog Institute to develop 'Smooth Sailing', an online mental health service for high school students.



"Smooth Sailing is a new dimension of youth mental health treatment and care," says Dr O'Dea.

"It's similar to a virtual clinic, so young people can access the service from any internet-enabled device, assess their state of mind, and be immediately connected to tailored treatment strategies."

Interventions are graded according to symptom severity and range from online psycho-education and self-directed cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) programs, through to immediate connection with a school counsellor. Young people also receive a regular 'check in' sent fortnightly via SMS or email.

"We're aiming to direct young people towards a healthy way of thinking and breaking down the stigma that stops them from seeking clinical care when they need it," she says.

## EARLY INTERVENTION IS KEY

A unique aspect of Smooth Sailing is its integration into the school system, and Dr O'Dea says the program specifically targets young adults due to the significant potential for prevention.

"We want to engage with high school students in particular as this is known to be the best time to intervene if we wish to prevent mental illness."

Providing this kind of service universally means that all young people, no matter what their situation, can learn the necessary skills for lifelong management of mental health. And engaging young people through schools means they have a direct connection to someone close by who can provide qualified and ongoing assistance – the school counsellor.

## TAKING SMOOTH SAILING INTO THE FUTURE

Funded by a private philanthropic donation from HSBC, Smooth Sailing has undergone significant community consultation and a pilot study in NSW secondary schools. Preliminary results indicate that the service is highly acceptable among school counsellors, increasing the efficiency of it. The service led to improved detection of mental health issues, including suicidality and self-harm.

***For me, the most rewarding part is knowing my research can make a real difference, explains Dr O'Dea.***

Smooth Sailing is now being prepared for a large randomised controlled trial involving 16 NSW schools in 2018. Ultimately, Dr O'Dea wishes to see it expanded to high schools nationally, with potential for adoption in international settings.

In recognition of her work, Dr O'Dea has received the prestigious TheMHS Early Career Researcher Award for Innovation. She has also been named a 2017 Young Tall Poppy for her research excellence and passion for engaging the community in science.

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