

# Help-Seeking Behaviors for Mental Illness and the Effect of Stigma Among College Students of Various Identities



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PSY 498A Senior Capstone: Applied Projects

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## Background

For the duration of my time at the University of Portland, I have been involved in Active Minds, a mental health awareness and advocacy club. Active Minds is a community that fosters conversation surrounding mental illness with the intention of offering students a community of support and acceptance. This club was founded in response to the loss of several UP students to suicide and the realization that students are in dire need of more support.

We hold weekly meetings that cover topics pertaining to specific mental illnesses, education on available resources, de-stressing practices, coping with loss, various issues that affect mental health, and more. The club also has staple events that are open to the entire UP community. One event is centered around suicide prevention and awareness with 1,100 paper flowers displayed in the quad. Each flower represents a life of a college student lost to suicide each year. Another is Stress Less Week, held the week before finals that offers many de-stressing activities for students. Perhaps the biggest event is Fresh Check Day, a mental health fair dedicated to suicide prevention and general mental health education. Clubs and organizations across campus run booths that each offer activities and resources about a particular topic of mental health.

As a leader of Active Minds for all of my undergraduate career, including serving as President for the last two years, I have had the honor of working with students, faculty, and administrators to advocate for increasing the level of support available to students regarding their emotional and mental well-being. I have developed a passion for helping others seek the support they need and make help more readily available.

## Introduction

College students are faced with unique challenges that can affect one's mental health. A vast amount of research demonstrates that mental illness is a growing concern for the college-aged population, in particular. Approximately 50% of college students severely struggle with their mental health, yet a strikingly small proportion, 25%, of these students seek proper help.<sup>1</sup> Many barriers exist that influence the likelihood that someone seeks psychological help. The stigma that follows mental illness continues to be a leading barrier. An individual's background and identity is another serious barrier that is shown to influence both help-seeking behaviors and level of stigma.

Stigma denotes one's negative attitudes toward individual's with mental illness and toward individual's who seek mental health support. People develop a perceived stigma as they become aware of widespread judgement of those with mental illness and therefore fear they would be discriminated against for seeking psychological help.<sup>2</sup> Understandably, this leads people to hesitate to seek help, even when in emotional distress, with the concern for their overall self-worth. With this cyclical dilemma of stigma harming one's self-worth, and possibly their mental health, and then not receiving proper support from such harm, it is a powerful detriment to an individual's mental well-being.

Being a part of marginalized identities has immense influence on one's help-seeking behavior and perceived stigma. Female-identifying individuals are more likely to seek help for mental illness compared to their male-identifying counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, studies indicate that students of non-White racial identities report more stigma and seek mental health support less often.<sup>4</sup> The reason for this is multi-faceted. Various cultures hold different attitudes about mental illness, where seeking help for mental illness may be perceived as a sign of weakness, embarrassment to oneself and their family, or even an impairment of intellect.<sup>5,6</sup>

While the influence of gender and race on stigma levels and help-seeking behaviors is notable, sexual orientation is also a factor in need of more research. Those identifying as LGBTQ+ experience unique vulnerabilities to mental health struggles and fall victim to stigmatization at higher rates too. Such vulnerabilities include discrimination and institutional inequality, sexual harassment or assault, and relational problems.<sup>7</sup> There is also evidence indicating a lack of help-seeking among the LGBTQ+ community. Hypothetical reasoning for this includes fear of further victimization or disbelief that effective help is available to them.<sup>8</sup> Sexual stigma and prejudice is particularly complex. Sexual identity is able to be concealed more, in comparison to race or gender.<sup>9</sup> The concealed nature of sexual identity puts these individuals at risk for isolation, feelings of shame, and overall low self-worth. Considering the negative effects this will have on LGBTQ+ individuals, emotional support is imperative. This is why further analysis is vital to identifying possible barriers to seeking help that if broken down, would improve the mental well-being of many individuals and decrease overall stigma associated with the vulnerable populations.

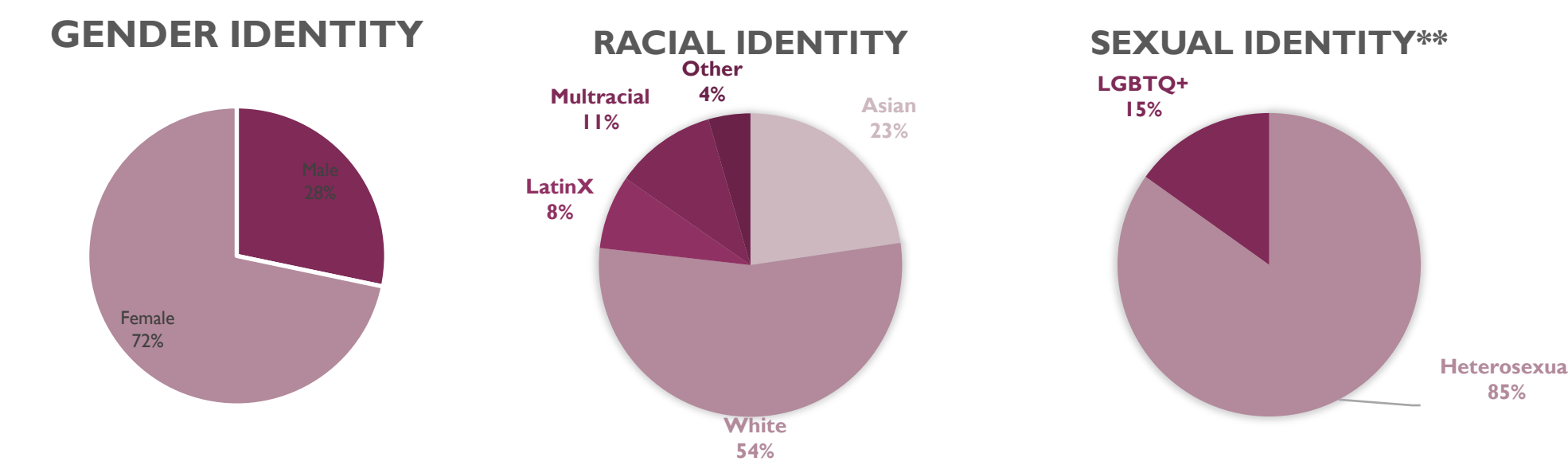
### Research Questions:

- ❖ How does identity influence one's level of stigma for receiving psychological help?
- ❖ Where are students from various identities more likely to seek psychological help?

## Methods

○ A population of undergraduate college students (N=747) were asked to complete a series of psychological measures online.

○ Demographic Information:



\*\*For this analysis approach, sexual identity is simplified into two groups: individuals identifying as heterosexual and others who identify within the LGBTQ+ community. This is to increase statistical power to compare dominant and non-dominant sexual identities. However, we recognize the unique challenges various sexual identities pose.

Participants were asked their sexual identity from the following list:

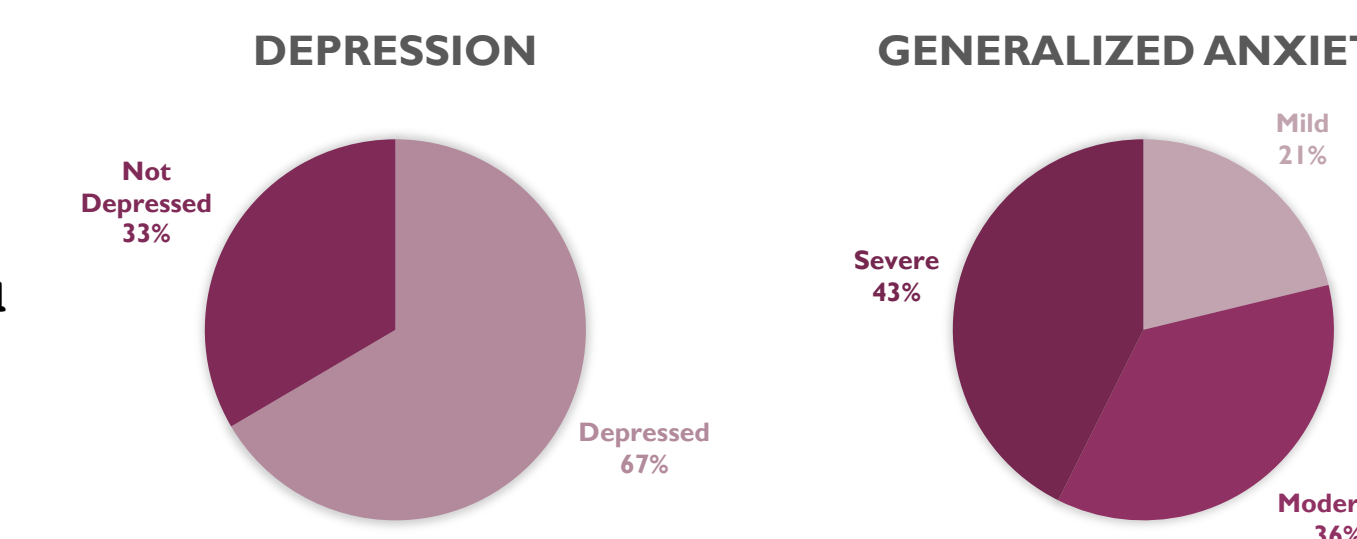
- Heterosexual
- Lesbian/Gay
- Bisexual
- Asexual
- Pansexual
- Other (specified)

○ Among these surveys were:

○ The General Help Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ)<sup>10</sup> involves 9 items that each represent a mode of seeking help:

- Intimate Partner
- Friend
- Parent
- Other Relative/Family Member
- Mental Health Professional
- Phone Helpline
- Physician
- Religious Leader
- Other

- Stigma Scale for Receiving Psychological Help (SSRPH)<sup>11</sup>
- Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale<sup>12</sup>
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder<sup>13</sup>

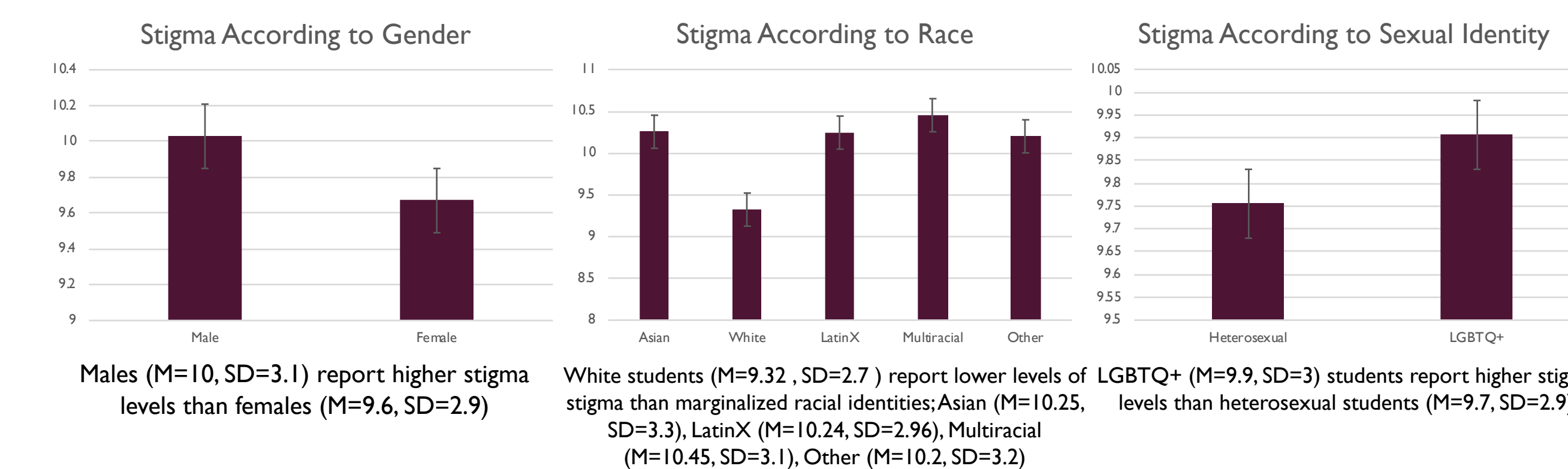


## Results

“If you were experiencing a personal or emotional problem, how likely is it that you would seek help from..”

Stigma & Personal/Emotional Distress	Pearson Correlation
Intimate Partner	-.021
Friend	-.165**
Parent	-.032
Relative	0.006
Mental Health Professional	0.002
Phone Helpline	.142**
Doctor	0.063
Religious Leader	.124**
Other	.14**

\*p<.05  
\*\*p<.001



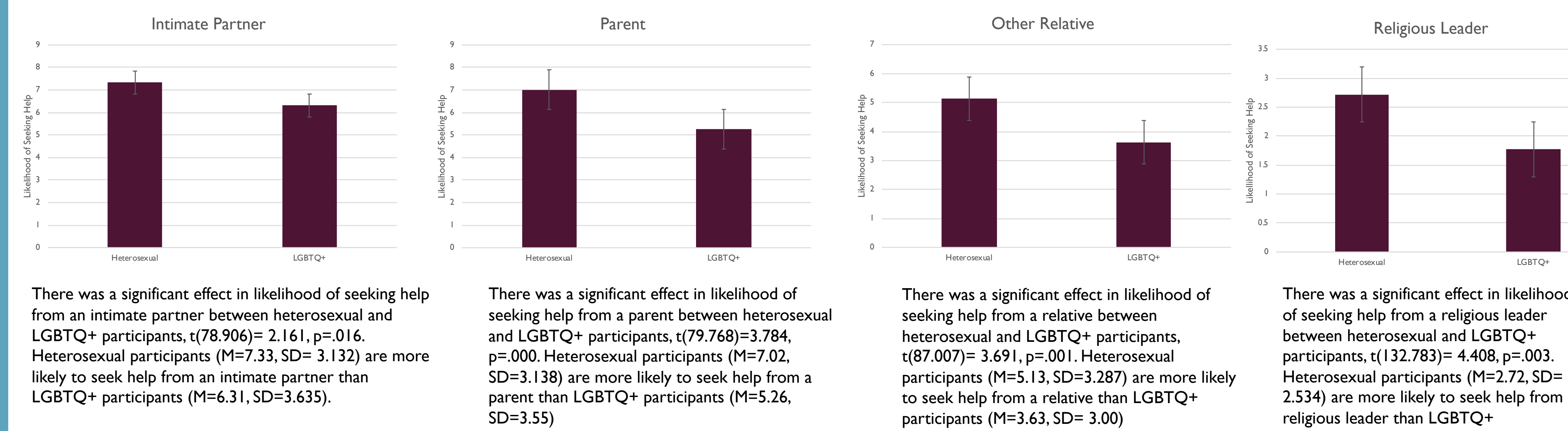
### Race:

There was no significant mean differences among the race groups for any item of help seeking.

### Gender:

There was a significant effect in likelihood of seeking help from a friend between male and female-identifying participants,  $t(233.932) = -2.949, p = 0.004$ . Males ( $M = 7.14, SD = 2.766$ ) are less likely to seek help from a friend than females ( $M = 7.93, SD = 2.433$ ).

### Sexual Identity:



There was a significant effect in likelihood of seeking help from an intimate partner between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ participants,  $t(78.906) = 2.161, p = 0.016$ . Heterosexual participants ( $M = 7.33, SD = 3.132$ ) are more likely to seek help from an intimate partner than LGBTQ+ participants ( $M = 6.31, SD = 3.635$ ).

There was a significant effect in likelihood of seeking help from a parent between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ participants,  $t(79.768) = 3.784, p = 0.000$ . Heterosexual participants ( $M = 7.02, SD = 3.138$ ) are more likely to seek help from a parent than LGBTQ+ participants ( $M = 5.26, SD = 3.55$ ).

There was a significant effect in likelihood of seeking help from a relative between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ participants,  $t(87.007) = 3.691, p = 0.001$ . Heterosexual participants ( $M = 5.13, SD = 3.287$ ) are more likely to seek help from a relative than LGBTQ+ participants ( $M = 3.63, SD = 3.00$ ).

There was a significant effect in likelihood of seeking help from a religious leader between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ participants,  $t(132.783) = 4.408, p = 0.003$ . Heterosexual participants ( $M = 2.72, SD = 2.534$ ) are more likely to seek help from a religious leader than LGBTQ+ participants ( $M = 1.77, SD = 1.444$ ).

## Discussion

- Like individuals all around the country, students at UP suffer from mental health struggles, particularly anxiety and depression. The results demonstrate that each participant reported suffering at least mild anxiety, with the striking majority reporting severe anxiety. Well over half of students report diagnosable depressive symptoms, as well. This leads to the question of whether or not students are actually willing to seek help for the mental health struggles they each suffer at some point.
- Students express different people they feel comfortable reaching out to for support. Those who report higher levels of stigma are less likely to seek help from their friends. Relationships with friends is crucial for college students. Developmentally, college-aged individuals are heavily reliant on fostering positive peer relationships. If these individuals are particularly hesitant to go to a friend for emotional support, they may be unable to properly develop healthy relationships with others.
- Additionally, results demonstrate differences in help-seeking behaviors based upon marginalized identity. Race and gender appear to have little influence on where students are likely to seek emotional support. While this does not align with the literature, a possibility is the barriers that marginalized populations experience are not as prominent for members of the UP community. Given UP is a private, Catholic institution, the challenges marginalized populations face, such as lower SES, unequal access to education, etc., may not align with the challenges students of marginalized groups at UP face. This does not disregard the fact that these students are more susceptible to discrimination and inequality, however.
- A particular population that stands out in comparison to others is those from marginalized sexual identities. Comparing sexual majority and minority, groups it is evident that those who identify with a marginalized sexual identity are less likely to seek emotional support from a multitude of people. Among these people are intimate partners and family members. If an individual's parents and closest loved ones do not fully support their identity, it is unlikely they have a relationship where emotional support is sought after. Historically, religious institutions and practices have imposed stigma and prejudice against the LGBTQ+ community for decades. This has understandably cultivated a generalized hesitancy for those in a sexual minority groups to seek help from religious leaders.
- These marginalized populations markedly face distinct challenges that lead to differences in help-seeking behaviors. Individuals who are a part of multiple marginalized groups are even more vulnerable to discrimination, inequalities, and disparities. Multiple marginality describes an individual who identifies with more than one marginalized population. For example, women of color are at higher risks of discrimination compared to white women. This adds an extra layer of complexity that will continue to affect learned stigma and attitudes toward seeking help.
- The paper that complements this poster presentation will offer further analyses looking at participants of multiple marginalized populations.

## Future Directions

- Focus on how multiple marginality as a factor that increases one's barriers to seeking psychological help. This will attempt to identify particularly susceptible populations that may have been an additional barrier.
- Look at particular stressors participants are reporting in our data set.
- Differentiate sexual identities to provide more in-depth analysis of barriers those of marginalized sexual identities face.
- Explore how UP students compare to students in other institutions.

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## Acknowledgements

Department of Psychological Science, College of Arts and Sciences