
The Lived Experience Of Adolescents Who Support Friends With Mental Health Needs

Ashley Roach, PhD, RN

Oregon Health & Science University School of Nursing



School of
NURSING



THE UNIVERSITY OF
TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

Introduction

❖ Significance

- Adolescent development, mental health, peer support

❖ Design

- Phenomenology in adolescent research, recruitment, data analysis

❖ Results

❖ Challenges and Ethical Considerations

❖ Implications

Significance: Adolescent Development



Neurocognitive changes



Psychosocial changes



Lifelong implications

Significance: Mental Health

- ❖ Almost **50%** of adolescents met criteria for a mental health disorder
 - **14.3%** met criteria for a mood disorder
 - **31.9%** met criteria for an anxiety disorder
- ❖ Suicide is the **2nd** leading cause of death for adolescents

Significance: Peer Support

- ❖ Influences of friends
 - Positive and negative
- ❖ Supportive peer relationships are beneficial
 - Formal and informal
- ❖ Negative aspects of providing support



Design - Phenomenology

- ❖ Open-ended questions
- ❖ Developmental considerations
 - Experience of the phenomena

Design - Recruitment



High-school
age students

Inclusion and
exclusion
criteria

Design –
Data
Analysis

Review of transcripts

Phenomenology
Research Group

Strategies to Ensure
Rigor

Results

Participant	Age	Grade	Gender	Race	Gender of Friend	Length of Friendship
1	16	11	Cis F	White	Trans M	5+ years
2	16	11	Cis F	Asian	Cis M	3-5 years
3	16	11	Cis F	Black	Cis M	3-5 years
4	17	11	Cis M	White	Cis M	Less than 6 months
5	17	12	Cis M	White	Cis F	Less than 6 months

“Kids Helping Kids”

I was always ready to help because I never want any of my friends to feel like they're not loved or there for them. (P3)

■ Existential Grounds: Others, Time, World Body

■ Figural Themes

- Being Fearful
- Maintaining Vigilance
- Seeking Knowledge
- Keeping Secrets
- Involving Others,
- Setting Boundaries,
- Feeling Honored

Being
Fearful - “I
Was Just Afraid
All The Time
And Stressed”

- *And the rough thing of helping someone through that situation is the constant if they die, you're going to feel guilty. And it's just this fear, I guess... Back then it was really hard because I didn't know and I didn't have the faith, but I was just afraid all the time and stressed. The stress came from the fear. (P2)*
- *I didn't want to lose his friendship, and then I did, and then it broke me. [Parents] could tell something was wrong because I was just very sad. I was just scared of losing that friendship. (P1).*
- *It was just emotional because someone pouring out their heart to you and crying and being just very honest is ... It's a very emotional thing. (P3)*

Maintaining Vigilance: “You Want To Keep An Eye On Them”

I felt like I was there with him, like I was going through it with him because I was always there to help him, anytime of day... dealing with a friend who has depression, it's like always in the back of your head. Like you want to keep an eye on them. (P3)

You don't realize it, really, but for hours, you'll just sit and message each other back and forth, and those are those long conversations. Imagine you're giving an amount of time to someone and saying, "Yes, I ..."
Those long conversations show that you're willing to give that time to someone to make sure they're feeling good about everything (P4)

Seeking Knowledge: “I Didn’t Want To Say The Wrong Thing”

- *They're telling me all these things, but I can't do anything. I can't relate to them. I can't do anything. (P2)*
- *I didn't want to say the wrong thing and I didn't know what the best approach was to make sure nothing bad happened. (P1)*
- *The education that we have about it and health, everyone hates it and it's dumb and no one likes it. But everyone knows [mental health problems] are happening. (P2)*
- *So, I feel like I know a bit about it, but then again, I haven't experienced it personally. And I try to get right information from more professional sources. (P5)*
- *Trying to talk someone off of the ledge of suicide, it's playing Russian roulette. One time it could work and the next time it doesn't and they're dead. It's true. I feel like at that point I would feel guilty for the rest of my life because I tried to help, but I made it worse. (P3)*

Keeping Secrets: “If Someone Tells Me Something, It's Not My Business To Tell”

- *I was very keen on whatever someone tells me, that's what they told me in confidence. It's not for me to go tell anyone else. It's like I do believe in keeping secrets. Like if someone tells me something, it's not my business to tell unless they are a danger to themselves or others. (P3)*
- *You even keep that you're helping someone a secret, but I would say that you still have to play it safe, because, a lot of times teenagers keep how they're feeling a secret. (P4)*
- *Kids support kids, friends are important to them, and they do care about what adults think, but they don't feel adults understand or try to understand...And it's hard because counselors, you want to trust them and make it be okay but it's not always going to work that way. And if they have to tell the parents you don't want that to happen and it's just, "Ugh, what do you do?" (P2)*

Involving Others: “At Some Point It Gets Out Of Hand”

- *At some point you have to because at some point it gets out of hand and you have to talk to someone because teenagers, some of them are secretive by nature because they don't want to get in trouble, but then there are some times where it's like we're far beyond trouble right now. (P3)*
- *There are times where it's like you cannot be just this one source of help. Sometimes, you got to make sure there's a community of help available, which would, a lot of times, be just a group of friends or something. I think, a lot of times, when bringing in others, you have to make sure that ... it's playing a hard game because you can never actually really know. (P4)*

Setting Boundaries:

“Sometimes
You Can't
Have The
Answer Of
How To Get
Better”

- *I was getting really stressed because I didn't know how to handle all the stuff that he was putting out....If I allow them to personally bring down my day, then it's just allowing their depression to affect me, and I can't let that happen or else I won't be able to help other people. (P2)*
- *I am very much of a person who will take a load until it breaks, until I personally have to take a step back for my own mental health...if you need advice today, I just cannot give it. A lot of my friends would respect that. They respected that more than if I would try to just spit some really lame advice that didn't help and just actually harmed them more (P3)*
- *I don't 100% comfortable because again that's someone else's health that you're taking into your hands.... I can't get someone a therapist, right? I can't get someone to get a medical diagnosis. They're going to have to do that themselves.” (P5)*

Feeling Honored: “I Felt Honored Being Trusted On That Kind Of A Level”

- *I also felt honored being able to be trusted on that kind of a level. (P2)*
- *It helps us get closer. (P5)*
- *I love helping people. It fills me, helping out my friends, it's not just ... It doesn't just help them feel better. It makes me feel like I did something. I helped change the world a little bit at a time. (P3)*
- *Not all people can speak to that. It's not every person being able to support someone who's going through those things, and I don't have much stress outside of school and whatnot in my life. And so, I feel like that gives me the ability to put more of my time and effort into other people. (P5)*

CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS



ADOLESCENTS AS
A VULNERABLE
POPULATION



DISCUSSING
SENSITIVE TOPICS



REPORTS OF
DISTRESS OR SI



OBTAINING
PARENTAL
CONSENT

Implications



Practice



Research



Policy

QUESTIONS?
