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Background

Until recently in Arab countries, mental illness was considered dichotomous: individuals were either 'mentally healthy' or 'mentally ill', with no dedicated mental health system in place.

In Egypt, a country of over 100 million citizens, with over 50% of it under 25, there are less than 1000 registered psychiatrists.

Evidently, there is a deficiency in the mental health care system and access to any kind of mental health care for adolescents and young adults is challenging.

Objectives

Understanding Egyptian students' experience with mental health care, help-seeking behavior, and barriers in accessing care, in order to appropriately meet them where they are.

Methods

An online cross-sectional survey was distributed to students at the faculty of medicine at Tanta University in Egypt.

The survey was developed by researchers from Tanta University and the University of British Columbia (UBC) as part of a collaboration on student mental health. The survey link was sent to all the medical school students to explore their experience with psychiatric illness in their personal life, their help seeking behaviours and barriers to accessing care.

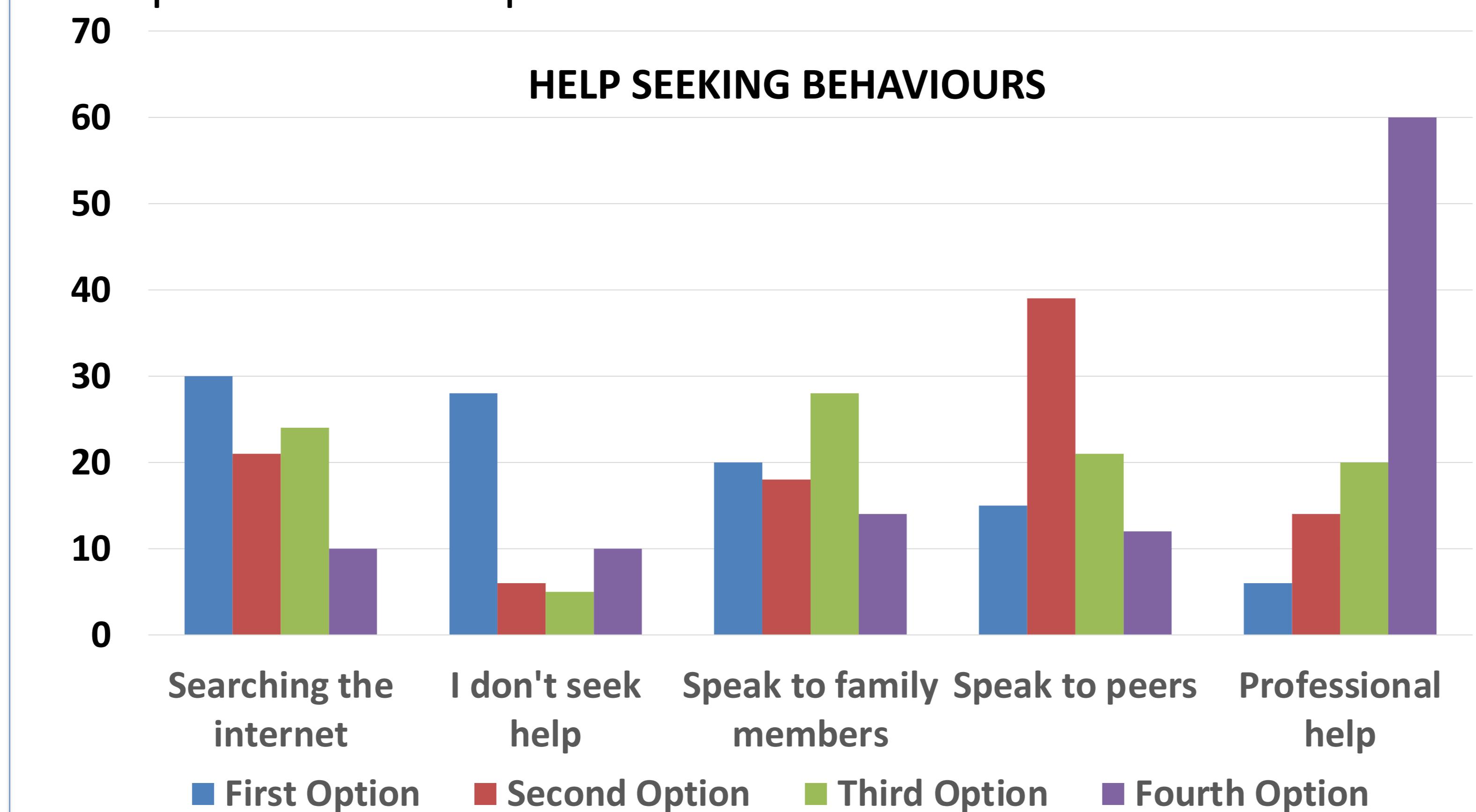
Chi-square and one-way ANOVA tests were performed for inferential analyses using a significance level of 0.05.

Results

Of the 707 individuals who completed the survey (90.9% response rate), 60.5% were female, 62.0% lived in urban areas, and the mean age of the sample was 20.5 (± 1.8) years old.

54% of the students reported that they had been affected by mental health problems at some point in their life: 16% reported they were dealing with a mental health challenges at the time of assessment, 16% had experienced mental health problems in the past, and 22% had a family member or friend who has dealt with a mental health problem.

Searching the internet and social media was ranked first by most students, followed by consulting peers and friends, as well as family members. The majority of participants were least likely to seek professional help.



Reasons for not seeking care are shown in the Figure above.

In terms of gender differences, female students were more likely not to seek help when compared to males ($p=.001$) and preferred to speak to family members first. There was a statistically significant difference only in the stigma as a barrier between genders ($p=0.014$).-

Discussion and Conclusion

The Arab culture has a different perspective towards mental illness when compared to North America. Experiencing difficulties with one's mental health is commonly viewed as a breakdown in an individual's religious faith. As a result, religious healers, rather than mental health professionals, are often sought after to address these concerns. In addition, some researchers have hypothesized that women might experience heightened stigma compared with men, as women more strongly represent their family's honor, and their seeking out a therapist could bring greater shame to the family or limit future marriage proposals.

As the internet was the most common help-seeking behavior among Egyptian students. It can be a readily-available tool which can provide access to mental health support services. Its heavy use within this population, and their familiarity with this technology, should be leveraged to better guide them through the mental health care system. Utilizing online interventions for psychoeducation and counselling services would allow them to meet their needs and meet them where they are.