

Definition

Problems with self-esteem including, shyness, embarrassment, concerns about physical appearance, feelings of worthlessness, etc. Excludes sexual and physical development, eating disorders.

Central themes of adolescence include discovering oneself, creating a personality and shaping a personal image of oneself. Adolescence is a period of intensified self-consciousness with the individual being very concerned with their outward appearance. Facial features, hair arrangements, posture, dress, weight and height are put to the test of scrutiny. At times, the adolescent is only able to see him or herself through the haze of an idealised image. Often the adolescent will focus on the ways in which he or she fails to meet this ideal which is associated with low self-esteem and unhappiness about their self-image.

Adolescence is also a time of intensified sensitivity to reflections from the environment. How one stands with one's peers in adolescence is particularly important in determining how one stands with oneself. Adolescents actively try out roles and manners and test these out through social interactions. Any negative response from peers can cause significant concern.

KHL Caller Data

In any twelve month period Kids Help Line (KHL) receives approximately 2,000 calls from young people in Australia regarding self-image. These account for 2% of all calls received.

In general, girls make two thirds of calls to KHL. However, notably more females (83%) phone about self-image issues than males (17%). Table 1 (below) shows the breakdown of these calls by age and gender.

AGE	FEMALES	MALES
5 - 9	2%	1%
10 - 14	28%	6%
15 - 18	53%	10%

Table 1.

This gender 'imbalance' is supported by US research that claims girls are more likely than boys to develop a negative body image and disparage their intellectual abilities (Parents, 1993).

Counsellors record the young person's ethnic background for 25% of self image calls. Of these, the majority are Anglo-Australian (84%). However, there are significant representations of callers from Indigenous (4%) and non-English speaking backgrounds (12%).

The majority of calls about self-image reflect the populations distribution with 65% located in metropolitan areas and the remaining 35% in rural and remote areas.

Nature of Self Image Calls

The young people who call KHL regarding self-image phone for a variety of reasons. These include the caller's general personal appearance such as weight, pimples, acne and feeling 'ugly'; and social problems such as feeling shy and awkward, withdrawn, unpopular or 'uncool'. Figure 1 provides a breakdown of these calls.

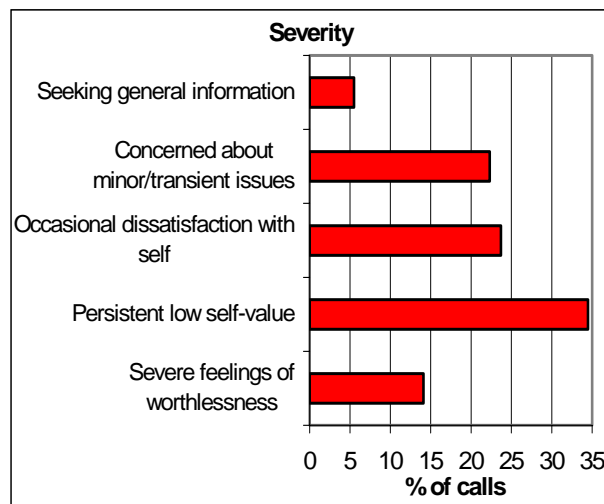


Figure 1.

Almost half (49%) of these callers state they are experiencing persistent feelings of low self-value or severe feelings of worthlessness.

For example:

Female (11) is being teased at school due to being overweight and she is starting to believe that she is a horrible person because of her weight. She has been wagging swimming lessons to avoid kids looking at her.

Female (12) discussed feelings of low self esteem, particularly in relation to her parent's criticism. She reported feeling angry, frustrated and low. These could be traced to feelings of fear of failure and fear of rejection. She talked about really wanting to be herself and express herself, but worried about whether her parents would still accept her.

Male (15) has a lot of difficulty making friends and the friendships that he had he felt were shallow. Feels rejected by other people and finds it really hard to have honest meaningful friendships with people.

Female (17) is having trouble dealing with the compliments she is receiving from an admiring male friend. She doesn't like receiving compliments as it means that the person is really looking and taking notice of her. She would rather be invisible and unknown. She worries that if people get to know her they will realise that they don't like her.

An additional 24% of callers state they are experiencing occasional dissatisfaction with themselves. For example:

Female (12) doesn't like her body image. She feels ugly and overweight.

Female (14) sometimes feels worthless as her attitudes and values are quite different from others.

Male (16) caller in bridal party, but doesn't want to go to Bucks Night because shy and believes he will not fit in at all with other guys.

Female (17) feels like she is getting old and ugly, is often depressed and cuts off from other people.

A further 22% report concern about minor or transient issues. Such concerns include weight related issues, shyness and fear of starting a new school. For example:

Female (8) talked about some of her concerns moving to a new town. Says she is shy which makes it hard to talk to people she would like to talk to.

Male (10) spoke about bullying at school, lack of friends, a girl rejecting him and the feelings of low self worth that these situations provoked.

Female (15) is unhappy with the shape of her legs. Has tried dieting and some exercise. Ex-boyfriend has been making comments about the shape of her legs.

Male (16) moving to a new town and school and worried he won't make friends and will look like a nerd. Stressed also because new town is much bigger and he has only ever lived in a small town where everyone knows everyone.

The remaining 5% of callers seek general information. For example:

Male (15) is concerned with bad skin.

Female (13) says popular boys say she's too skinny.

KHL plays an important support role for young people with concerns about self-image. In a non-judgmental environment the young person can explore his or her true self and acknowledge the assets that make them unique individuals. The adolescents' self-doubts are met with empathy by counsellors and callers are empowered to develop a positive self-image and to explore ways to enhance their self-esteem. The confidential and anonymous nature of KHL ensures the individual can test out various roles and manners in a safe environment which assists them to 'find themselves'.

Outcome of Call

Given the complexity of self image issues, KHL counsellors spend (on average) 36 minutes talking to these young people each time they phone. When compared to an average of 19 minutes across all problems, the duration of counselling to young people who phone about self image is significantly longer.

The vast majority (86%) of calls concerning self image are of a nature such that no referral is required. A further 6% of callers make contracts with their counsellor to call back.

Four percent of those who phone are referred to other support services. The most common referrals are for face-to-face counselling or to health centres and mental health services.

The remaining calls are either terminated before a referral can be made or no appropriate service is available.

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For more information

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www.kidshelp.com.au

NATIONAL OFFICE:

PO Box 376, Red Hill, Qld, 4059
Ph (07) 3369 1588 Fax (07) 3367 1266
Email admin@kidshelp.com.au
24 hour telephone counselling line: 1800 55 1800