

Increasing Help-Seeking via Peer-Led Clubs: The Interactive Effect between Perceived Peer Support and Mental Health Stigma

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INTRODUCTION

- Across the country, a concerning pattern is on the rise in teens: increasing rates of suicide - with LGBTQ+ youth and youth of color being most affected. According to CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Data Summary & Trends Report: 2011-2021,
 - 1 in 3 teens reported poor mental health in 2021
 - 22% of teens seriously considered attempting suicide and 10% had attempted suicide
- Suicide is now the third leading cause of death for teens ages 15-19 (CDC, 2023). Youth mental health has been declared a public health crisis (HHS, 2021).
- Perceived stigma and anticipated embarrassment is the most frequently reported barrier to youth seeking mental health support, followed by lack of knowledge about mental health and available help, and other systemic/structural factors such as limited accessibility of mental health care (Radez et al., 2021).
- Promoting peer connection and support is a key goal for Our Minds Matter (OMM), an upstream, peer-led suicide prevention program that aims to foster protective factors: social connectedness, help-seeking, prosocial behavior, and healthy coping. Because teens turn to each other in times of crisis, OMM empowers teens to be the changemaker in their school community.
- Research has long shown that peer support is beneficial for young folks' mental health for variety of reasons: social connection, emotional safety net, positive influence/modeling behaviors (Simmons et al., 2023; Pearson, 2023).

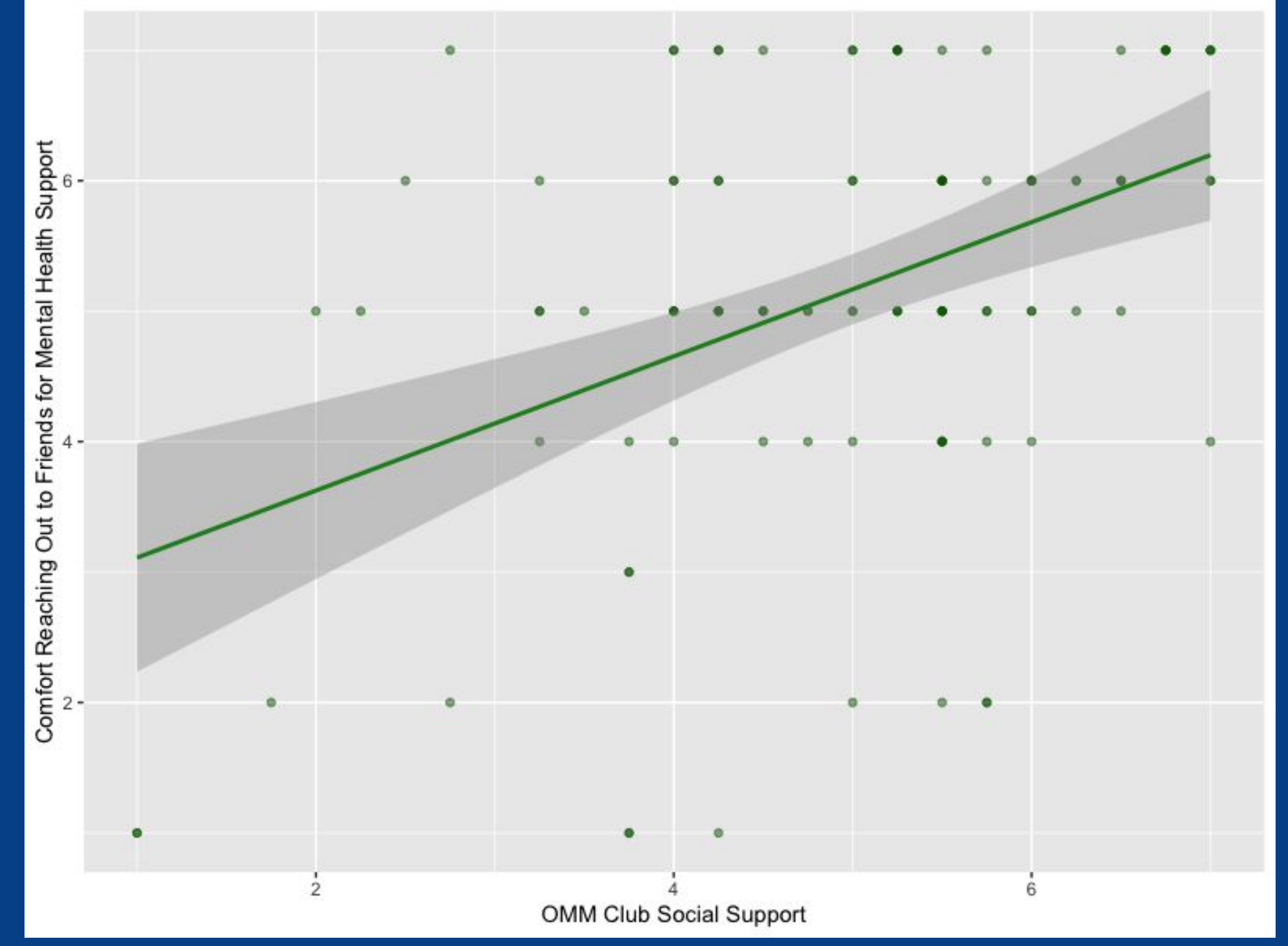
PURPOSE

- The current study examined the ways students' recognition of **mental health stigma in their schools** and an index of their experience with OMM clubs - their **perceived support from fellow club members** - informed their attitudes on help-seeking, as well as confidence in reaching out to specific targets for mental health support (i.e. school counselors, parents, friends, mental health professionals).
- We hypothesized that perceived peer support would be positively tied with help-seeking and that mental health stigma in school would be negatively associated with help-seeking. We explored interactions between perceived peer support and stigma, addressing whether perceived OMM peer support buffered students from negative impacts of school stigma.

METHODS

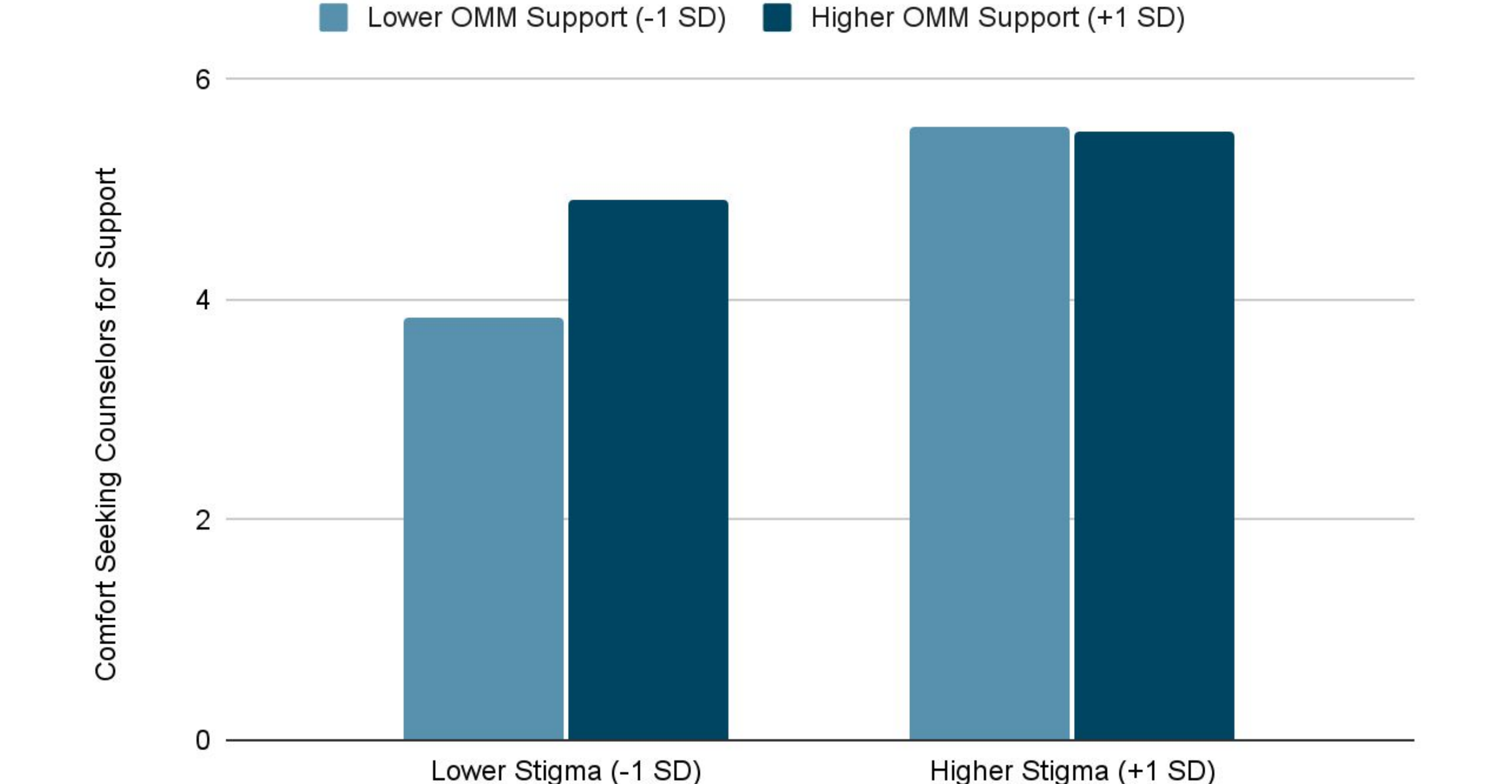
- During the 2022-2023 academic year, 111 high school students (58.5% cisgender girls; 48.5% Black, 29.9% White; 71.2% upperclassmen) from multiple school districts including the national capital region (Northern Virginia, Washington DC, Montgomery County, MD), parts of Ohio, and other regional communities provided online reports about their involvement with Our Minds Matter clubs and their attitudes about mental health and views about the school environment.
- **OMM Club Social Support** was collected from 4 items based on the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) and items were collected on a 1-7 scale (Mean = 5.07, SD = 1.28).

Students who felt better supported by peers in their clubs also had more comfort reaching out for mental health supports from friends, parents, and mental health professionals.



RESULTS

- OMM Club Social Support was positively correlated with general comfort with support seeking for instrumental support and problem solving ($r = .30$), as well as specific comfort reaching out to guidance counselors ($r = .35$), friends ($r = .42$), parents ($r = .19$), and outside professionals ($r = .30$) for mental health supports.
- Club social support was also positively linked with personal confidence to be able to take steps to increase mental health wellness ($r = .33$) and to remove barriers to mental health ($r = .38$).
- Club social support was not related to mental health stigmas at school ($r = -.01$).
- **Often, the ties between social support and students' mental health outcomes were not conditional on other factors.** However, mental health stigma at schools shaped whether students were more likely to turn to support from counselors.
- **Students in higher-stigma schools reported high motives for reaching out to counselors for support, regardless of club support.**
- **Students in lower-stigma schools were more likely to reach out to counselors for support if they felt better supported by peers in their club, as compared to students who endorsed lower in club support.**



DISCUSSION

- Our findings suggest that school counselors might be the most viable option when teens do not feel safe asking for help from others due to perceived high mental health stigma in their school community.
- On the contrary, in schools where mental health stigma is low, teens who felt better supported by peers are more likely than their counterparts to reach out for professional help, likely due to normalization of mental health problems, less concern about being judged by peers, and improved help-seeking literacy.
- These findings are consistent with the research findings that show school connectedness - "a sense of being cared for, supported, and belonging at school" - as a major predictor of students' mental health outcomes (CDC,2022), and highlight the importance of broad-based school intervention such as OMM that focused on promoting social connectedness among teens.