

A Survey of Public Utilization of Self-Help Materials

LISA M. NAJAVITS

*McLean Hospital
Harvard Medical School*

KIM A. WOLK

*Department of Psychology
Vanderbilt University*

THE WIDESPREAD USE of self-help materials has evoked mixed reactions. Self-help materials such as books and magazines and TV and radio call-in shows have been viewed as a potentially important tool for people with mild problems and for those who are unwilling or unable to obtain face-to-face treatment (Miller, 1969; Riessman, 1990). However, most of the materials have not been empirically validated, and it remains unclear how much actual benefit—or harm—result from their use (Bouhoutsos, Goodchilds, & Huddy, 1986; Rosen 1987).

This article is based on work completed at Vanderbilt University. A summary was presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Atlanta, Georgia, in August 1988.

Address correspondence to Lisa M. Najavits, McLean Hospital, Appleton 3, 115 Mill St., Belmont, MA 02178.

In this article we report on a telephone survey exploring public response to self-help materials: self-reported use of the materials during the past year, purpose of their use, benefit and harm obtained, seriousness of the problem, and perceived resemblance to psychotherapy. A total of 147 phone calls were made to metropolitan residents (chosen arbitrarily from the area phone book) by two advanced graduate students in clinical psychology. Of those contacted, 76 (51.7%) agreed to participate. The survey consisted of 10 questions quantified on a 0 to 9 scale and five demographic items (age, sex, education, whether subject had ever been in counseling or psychotherapy, and birthplace, that is, urban, rural, or suburban). For one half of the sample, the survey questions concerned written self-help materials (books and magazines); for the other half, the questions referred to electronic materials (radio and TV call-in shows). Results are reported for those ($n = 25$) who stated they had used self-help materials in the past year. There were no significant differences in demographic characteristics between the subjects of the two surveys (print, $n = 12$; electronic, $n = 13$).

Results indicate low use of self-help materials ($M = 1.6$, $SD = 3.1$). The main purposes for which the materials were sought were entertainment ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 3.2$) and factual information ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 3.1$) rather than advice for a particular problem ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 2.9$). For actual self-help received, primary benefits were in factual information ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 2.5$), perceived help to others ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 2.6$), and entertainment ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 3.2$), with low perceived help to self ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 2.9$). Benefits did not seem long lasting ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 3.0$). Harm from the materials was perceived as low, but was higher for others ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 2.2$) than for self ($M = 0.0$, $SD = 0.0$). Average seriousness of the problem for which self-help materials were sought was low to moderate ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 3.8$), and resemblance to psychotherapy was low to moderate ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 2.9$). However, the importance of licensure of the writer or host of self-help materials was relatively high ($M = 5.1$, $SD = 3.6$).

Of 11 t tests comparing print media and electronic media, 5 were significant or indicated trends showing the print media more positively than the electronic media. Print media was reported to provide more help to self ($M = 4.6$) than electronic media, $M = 1.3$, $t(24) = 3.3$, $p = .005$; the help was longer lasting, print $M = 4.1$, electronic $M = 1.8$, $t(23) = 2.0$, $p = .06$; advice was sought more from print media, $M = 3.6$, than from electronic media, $M = 1.2$, $t(24) = -.33$, $p = .04$; information was sought more from print media, $M = 5.5$, than from electronic media, $M = 3.2$, $t(24) = 2.0$, $p = .05$. Finally, the importance of licensing of the host or writer was seen as less of a need for print media, $M = 3.6$, than for electronic media, $M = 6.3$, $t(23) = -1.91$, $p = .07$.

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Our results suggest that reported use and impact of self-help materials are on average, quite mild. However, the results also indicate several areas in which self-help materials might be improved: monitoring the credentials of writers and hosts, increasing the amount of factual information offered, and improving the perceived status and quality of electronic media self-help relative to written media.

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