

Study on the causes and coping strategies of adolescent mental illness

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Abstract:

In recent years, especially since the epidemic, there has been an explosive increase in the incidence of adolescent mental disorders, which has aroused the attention of the whole society. From the perspectives of evolution, humanism, and psychodynamics, this paper analyzes the deep-rooted causes of the increasing incidence of psychological disorders in adolescents and explores various dilemmas adolescents face. From an evolutionary point of view, the current rate of social progress exceeds the rate of human evolution and the rate of cognitive improvement of young people, making it difficult for young people to adapt to complex social environments. In humanitarian terms, excessive academic pressure places a heavy burden on young people. From the perspective of psychodynamics, the conflict between standard, ego, and superego can cause mental illness in adolescents. In addition, this paper points out that adolescent mental illness marks the evolution of social awareness of mental health, and all parties in society need to build a supportive policy framework to foster widespread awareness of mental health.

Keywords: Adolescent Mental Illness; Evolution; Humanitarianism; Psychodynamics

1. Introduction

When adolescents, a group uniquely sensitive and vulnerable in our society, emit distress signals, the question arises: Will society heed the alarm? At present, the prevailing epidemic of depression and anxiety among young people should not be perceived solely in a negative light. Instead, it reflects the boosting of societal awareness around mental health. Depression and anxiety disorders, as delineated in the DSM-V, encompass any of the mood disorders that typically have sadness or empty or irritable mood as the predominant symptom, any of a group of disorders that have as their central organizing theme the emotional state of fear, worry, or excessive apprehension(American Psychiatric Association, 2015). According to the latest National Institutes of Health data, the prevalence of these disorders among adolescents has surged to unprecedented levels. While 17% experienced a major depressive episode in 2020, 69.1% of youths aged 12 to 17 said they experienced a major depressive episode during the first year of the pandemic. The incidence of mental disorders in adolescents continues to rise, demanding urgent attention (National Institute of Mental Health, 2023). Therefore, this paper attempts to disentangle the underlying causes of these alarming statistics through the lens of evolutionary, humanitarian, and psychodynamic psychology and to shed light on the patterns and dilemmas faced by young people while proposing strategies to improve the psychological

condition of young people in contemporary society.

2. Human and Social Evolution, slow and fast

Embedded within evolutionary psychology, concerned with the adaptive problems early humans faced in ancestral human environments, lies the notion that diseases often stem from a misalignment between human evolution and the contemporary climate (Crawford & Krebs, 2013). Concurrently, the theory of social acceleration posits that societal progress outpaces human evolution, leaving individuals grappling to adapt to intricate social landscapes (Rosa, 2013). These theories offer insights into the burgeoning prevalence of depression and anxiety among young people. Specifically, adolescents, with their unique developmental stages and characteristics, both physical and cognitive, such as puberty, desire for independence, and conflicts between different identities, are particularly vulnerable to environmental changes (Crocetti et al., 2023; Zimmer & Collins, 2006). These traits render adolescents prone to suffer mental health afflictions like depression and anxiety disorders, particularly when navigating complex environments or transitions. For instance, one study analyzed cross-sectional survey data obtained from April 9 to August 4, 2020, on 791 young adults, underscores that students who were mandated to relocate reported worse psychological outcomes with depressive, generalized anxiety, and PTSD symptoms during the epidemic

(Conrad et al., 2021). Undoubtedly, the sudden closure of schools, the loss of social support from peers and physical activity, and more prolonged interactions with caregivers brought additional mental health risk factors to this vulnerable group (Doan et al., 2020). As mentioned in the social acceleration theory, human beings are often unable to adapt to the pace of social and environmental change, and this inability to adjust creates an imbalance, which in turn creates risk factors for these mental disorders, especially for young people.

The advent of the technological revolution precipitated by the Industrial Revolution has markedly reduced the temporal overhead associated with communication and information dissemination, catalyzing even swifter technological advancements (Avery, 2021). Compared to this accelerating development, human evolution progresses comparably sluggishly. For example, the injection of artificial intelligence (AI) into education challenges traditional teaching paradigms, creating unprecedented levels of stress among young people and leading to greater susceptibility to mental disorders (Rudolph et al., 2024). Research has already begun to focus on some of the negative impacts of AI on humans; for example, in addition to the ethical and governance issues that come with AI, Artificial intelligence anxiety (AIA) is also prevalent among various groups, including young people, who are concerned about AI replacing specific jobs in the future, and about the time and financial costs of additional learning required in pursuing this technology (Wang & Wang, 2022; García-Peñalvo, 2023). In addition, although artificial intelligence is expected to become an important technology to help teenagers improve their mental health, the application of artificial intelligence has led to many adverse effects because teenagers are temporarily unable to distinguish between true and false information online (Liu, 2022; Aïmeur et al., 2023). Furthermore, the creation of AI-powered chatbots has increased the risk of adolescents becoming addicted to the Internet, which in turn increases the risk of mental disorders. AI chatbots are currently proliferating on social platforms, which means that when adolescents tap on a particular social app, they are presented with messages coded by artificial intelligence to match their tastes (Huang et al., 2024; Rudolph et al., 2024). In the period of artificial intelligence, radiation from blue light from screens, reduced physical activity, and countless unverifiable sources of information on the Internet will increase the risk of mental disorders in young people. (Ettman & Galea, 2023).

The cognitive abilities of young people have not kept up with the rapid pace of social and technological advance-

ments. This phenomenon may be due to designers deliberately creating complex traps that take advantage of the traits of young people. Consequently, this could be one of the reasons behind the increasing rates of depression and anxiety among young individuals.

3. The Missing Peak of the Pyramid

As articulated by Maslow, the requisites for contented individuals necessitate fulfillment (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). However, contemporary society frequently overlooks the psychological needs of young people within the rubric of a utilitarian ethos fixated on standardized metrics and materialistic gratification. Moreover, these overlooks increase the risk of mental health problems, especially a practical and short-sighted view of how to improve their academic performance. This explains why academic failure is a significant mental health risk factor for adolescents (WHO, 2004).

Obviously, excessive academic pressure is one of the primary reasons for the high incidence of mental disorders among young people, especially after the pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, the curriculum had to be shifted from the physical classroom. However, there often were no timely adjustments to the form and content of the teaching and the method of evaluating the learning outcomes (Giusti et al., 2021). Notably, in numerous regions and countries where test scores are the primary metric for assessing student development, there has been an observable increase in depression and anxiety among young people, exacerbated by academic stress (Feng et al., 2022). The heightened pressure to perform well academically, coupled with the disruptions caused by the pandemic, has significantly contributed to the mental health challenges students face (Sharma & Sarkar, 2020; Liu et al., 2021).

Deciding to help young people navigate these disorders and grow up holistically is challenging. Research has demonstrated that adolescents grappling with depression and anxiety often exhibit diminished self-esteem, a lack of purpose, and reduced feelings of security (Sowislo & Orth, 2013), these findings underscore the pivotal role of unconditional positive regard, a concept central to humanistic therapy, in alleviating adolescent depression and anxiety (Rogers, 1951; Baumeister et al., 2003). Unconditional positive regard, which involves accepting and valuing an individual without judgment, has been shown to foster an environment conducive to psychological growth and well-being, thus playing a crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of depression and anxiety among adolescents (Schimmel et al., 2001). Even elements of humanistic psychology when providing mental health support to

young people also increase the positive outcomes of mental health services (Fazel & Hoagwood, 2021).

Therefore, while paying attention to the mental health of adolescents, researchers should pay more attention to the overall needs and authentic voices of adolescents. Only when they are given adequate respect, a sense of belonging and security, and the opportunity for self-actualization will their mental health improve.

4. The Disequilibrium Among the “Three Selves”

From a psychodynamic perspective, mental maladies ensue from clashes amidst the id, ego, and superego (Renison, 2015). Throughout adolescence, myriad external stimuli can perturb this equipoise. The schism between the pursuit of scholastic attainment and the yearning for autonomy, the enigma of intimate relationships juxtaposed against physiological metamorphoses vis-à-vis societal strictures and religious injunctions advocating repression, collectively accentuate the vulnerability to mental health afflictions (Mucci, 2021). Certain stressful urges in adolescents manifest as increased appetite, which can lead to obesity and a negative self-image, which can also exacerbate an adolescent’s risk for depression and anxiety disorders (Sánchez-Rojas et al., 2022). Therefore, guiding teenagers in handling inner conflicts is crucial. For instance, adopting a balanced diet and a well-planned exercise routine can assist them in managing stress and reconciling internal struggles, thus promoting well-being (Bourke et al., 2022). Moreover, a nutritious diet and regular physical activity reduce inflammation and boost the brain’s production of neurotransmitters like dopamine and endorphins (Di Liegro et al., 2019). This increase in neurotransmitters improves well-being in adolescents and helps prevent depression and anxiety disorders (Czepczor-Bernat et al., 2021; Pahlavani, 2023). Furthermore, educational institutions implementing robust school-based sexual education initiatives boast students evincing superior mental well-being (Goldfarb et al., 2021). Moreover, comprehensive sex education fosters students’ ability to manage their impulses and engage in healthy intimate relationships, contributing to promoting respect and inclusivity for the LGBTQ+ community, ultimately mitigating instances of bullying and harassment (Proulx et al., 2019). Nevertheless, sex education is a topic that is often lacking in schools, especially in countries with relatively conservative cultures (Khalaf et al., 2014).

5. Conclusion

Noticeably, the proportion of adolescents with mental

health issues is significantly higher in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) regions (Gustavson et al., 2018; Henrich et al., 2010). While the surging incidence of depression and anxiety among adolescents evokes trepidation, it concurrently portends swifter and more comprehensive detection, a pivotal precursor to intervention. Public acknowledgment of mental health perturbations constitutes the inaugural stride toward convalescence. In contrast, teenagers in economically disadvantaged countries might be suffering from unrecognized mental health issues.

In summation, the prevailing epidemic of mental health disorders among adolescents is not solely a harbinger of gloom; rather, it signifies an evolving societal cognizance of mental well-being, affording a broader cohort of timely diagnoses and interventions. Indeed, we have come to the age of soaring rates of adolescent mental disorders, a cause for concern. It was also the epoch of heightened awareness towards mental health, a beacon of hope. It was the season of winter’s icy grip, boding an imminent spring. Enhancing cultural acumen in communications between healthcare practitioners and patients is pivotal in obliterating information asymmetries. Society must extend its benevolent arm to marginalized cohorts through supportive policy frameworks while engendering widespread awareness concerning mental health, thereby attenuating societal stigma and integrating marginalized factions into the mainstream social fabric.

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