

# The analysis of the causes of depression and anxiety among young people and the corresponding solution

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## Abstract:

While the past few decades have witnessed modernization, they have also seen an epidemic of depression and anxiety among young people. From the sociocultural perspective, the reasons include a change in social values from singular values to pluralism and a shift in social culture from collectivism to individualism, so young people's self-identity is threatened, and they tend to see others as competitors rather than teammates. Besides, social stigma and disdain for mental illness exacerbate mental problems among young people. This paper suggests that developing quality education, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and de-stigmatizing mental illness may be the solution.

**Keywords:** depression; anxiety; socio-cultural perspective; initiative.

## 1. Introduction

The mental well-being of young individuals' mental health problems among young people is a significant public health concern due to their outstanding contribution to impaired physical and life satisfaction extending into adulthood (Bor et al., 2014). The past few decades of modernization have witnessed significant societal value transformations, fundamentally altering how young people perceive themselves and interact with their surroundings (Matsumoto et al., 1996). As collectivist-oriented traditional values give way to a more complex and diverse array of cultural norms and expectations, young people often grapple with identity confusion and social isolation in an increasingly pluralistic society. Cultural evolution and value shift have created an environment where young individuals face a heightened risk of mental health problems (Greenfield, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2010). Additionally, cultural perspectives on mental illness, related stigma, and prejudice significantly hinder the treatment and recovery of mental health disorders (Corrigan, 2004; Ng, 1997). This essay aims to analyze the epidemic of depression and anxiety through the lens of socio-cultural factors and propose actionable solutions to address these issues.

## 2. From singular values to pluralism: confounded at life's crossroads.

A key sign of changing societal values is moving from a single, dominant set of values to a world where various values coexist. This evolution reflects a move away from a society where a single set of values dominates—dictating

what is considered successful, moral, and desirable—to a landscape where multiple perspectives, ideologies, and definitions of success coexist and compete for recognition and legitimacy (Lee, 2006; Inglehart & Welzel, 2010). The former defines a clear tendency to succeed in life; people who strive to achieve it won't face questions or denials, and everyone follows the same track in the most recognized way. However, in a pluralistic society, the introduction of varied concepts distracts people's belief in traditional values and opens up possibilities for other distinct value choices. During adolescence, teenagers face stage transformation crises of identity vs identity confusion (Erikson, 1968). In a pluralistic society, adolescents are confronted with many voices, each advocating for their paths to success and fulfillment. The identity confusion and uncertainty stemming from an overly complex value system can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and alienation (Schwartz et al., 2011). It is challenging for teenagers to choose among pluralistic information because the internet incorporates the various social realities of adolescents from diverse backgrounds, and teenagers may lack the vision of selecting the personalized information that is beneficial for their identity formation (Peter Weinreich, 1985). When young individuals cannot define their identity with coherent and stable values, they might constantly question their choices and worry about going down the right path. This can make everyday decisions feel overwhelming and contribute to a cycle of anxiety and depression (Claes et al., 2014). In Seth J. Schwartz's study (2015), adolescents whose identity development trajectories were characterized by high synthesis and low

confusion had fewer depressive and anxiety symptoms than those described by low synthesis and high confusion. As they face this dilemma, the effectiveness of educational environments in supporting the formation of a healthy self-identity appears to be lacking. Firstly, the excessive focus on academic performance in the current education system significantly limits students' time and opportunity to engage in essential processes of self-discovery. Secondly, the existing competitive academic environment fosters an endless cycle of social comparison (McCarthy & Morina, 2020). The constant need to measure up to peers can lead to self-worth being measured by an overreliance on external assessments. As forming a clear self-identity involves a complete self-evaluation system, an overreliance on external evaluations will lead to failures in constructing self-identity. As a result, depression and anxiety are more likely for troubled teenagers.

### **3. Transformation of collectivism to individualism: driven to excel in the rat race**

Another cultural change is the transformation of collectivism to individualism (Hamamura, 2012). One aspect that most strongly reflects the change is that people no longer pay close attention to the honour of their community but instead focus extensively on individual gains and losses. Under the circumstance of diminishing attention to group honour, people tend to view others as competitors rather than teammates (Triandis, 1995). In the past, everyone was part of a coherent community. Everyone worked to contribute to their common community and took pride in the collective honour. However, nowadays, more diverse cultural elements have been introduced through the internet, and egoism has developed. People now emphasize their interests, running after individual rather than community achievements (Greenfield, 2009). This mindset provides a basis for two situations that potentially lead to mental illness: increased social isolation and heightened competition stress (Twenge et al., 2019).

Firstly, pursuing individual achievement can foster fierce competition within society. Just as research demonstrated, fishermen from individualistic societies are more competitive and willing to compete than those from collectivistic societies (Leibbrandt et al., 2013). Since the resources are limited, they all hope to get the best of the resources by proving they are better than others (Kajanus, 2019). In this case, another's achievement is no longer a common boon to celebrate but rather a reminder for them to work harder to surpass this honour. Anxiety would be formed if one has pushed themselves to the limit but still can't win over others. Egotism tells them they can stand out, but realistic

circumstances dictate otherwise. Secondly, this egoism leads to constant comparisons between people, resulting in more isolated social distance. The relationship between people is no longer supportive friends but someone they have to have an advantage over to prove their egotism. So when one is emotionally broken, they would not ask for help from someone else because they can't trust competitors with their most fragile moment.

### **4. Culture of mental illness: stigmatization and dismissiveness**

The transition from ignoring the early signs of mental health issues to acknowledging them comes with a significant shift in perception—marked by the onset of stigma once a diagnosis is made. Many people view mental health problems such as depression and anxiety as signs of personal weakness, moral failing, or even as contagious. These misconceptions lead to the isolation and exclusion of individuals with mental health challenges, as they are often seen as unpredictable, dangerous, or incapable of recovery. They are defined as “psychotic” rather than “individuals experiencing psychosis”.(Stigma, Discrimination and Mental Illness - Better Health Channel, n.d.)

Individuals with mental health conditions frequently experience discrimination and social rejection in employment, education, and even healthcare. In this situation, because of the fear of being labelled and marginalized, individuals with depression and anxiety have to conceal their struggles and suppress their emotional expression. This avoidance behaviour further pushes them away from the necessary early interventions. Another harmful societal attitude towards mental illness frequently involves dismissiveness. Firstly, Common misconceptions hold that mental health issues are remote or unlikely, leading to a widespread reluctance to engage with or educate oneself about these conditions. This ignorance prevents the early recognition of symptoms essential for timely and effective treatment. Depression, for example, manifests through symptoms such as sleep disturbances, diminished motivation, and a loss of interest in activities once enjoyed. (Depressive Disorder (Depression), n.d.) These are not mere fluctuations in mood that can be easily dismissed or overcome; they are indications of a potentially severe somatic symptom disorder(Kapfhammer, 2006). However, societal misperceptions often lead to these symptoms being mischaracterized as laziness or incompetence. This misunderstanding discourages affected individuals from seeking help or acknowledging their mental state, perpetuating their struggles (McChesney & Doucet, 2018). A study by Mojtabai (2010) revealed that nearly 40% of people with severe psychological distress did not seek treatment due

to the belief that they should handle the problem on their own (Sartorius, 2007). Moreover, this cultural backdrop fosters a vicious cycle for those exhibiting early signs of depression. As these individuals endeavour to meet societal standards or personal expectations, their continued underperformance—stemming from untreated symptoms—escalates their mental health issues and leads to the progressive worsening of depression and anxiety symptoms, culminating in a definitive diagnosis.

### 5. Corresponding initiatives

Based on the analysis of the mechanisms behind the unprecedented surge in depression and anxiety, we propose the following initiatives.

Firstly, education should be an effective way of teaching students how to make choices in their lives. Facing massive decisions in this era, schools should play the role of mentors in student's life. For teaching facilities, teachers should be carefully selected so that they possess academic skills and are sensitive enough to care for students' emotions. For the class setting, free discussion sessions should be set to allow students to talk about their life's perspectives. Teenager's confusion should be acknowledged as a solvable issue that only requires proper guidance instead of ignoring it. (Peterson, 2007)

Secondly, despite the modern societal developments characterized by social atomization and individualism, we can counteract the depression and anxiety induced by this cultural shift by strengthening interpersonal connections. First, society shall create an atmosphere that values the happiness of a family and career success. A work-life balance needs more attention and support because the precious time spent with family members can not only reduce the possibility of family members suffering from anxiety due to extensive workload but can also foster mutual understanding and support within intimate relationships (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Milkie & Peltola, 1999). Additionally, policy should be made about the neighbouring community regarding the frequency of organizing communal activities. Interactive activities can deepen bonds between neighbours and form a more supportive community rather than isolated individual residents (Putnam, 2000; Rios, 2015).

Lastly, the de-stigmatization of mental illness concerns the prevention and intervention of depression, which is significant for fixing the problem of unprecedented rates of anxiety and depression. Since this problem stems from social norms, we shall tackle it on a social level. To form a more inclusive and supportive viewpoint about mental illness, governments should emphasize the procession of the popularization of mental illness knowledge. This ap-

proach helps the general public to recognize and further understand the causes, symptoms, and prevention methods of mental illness. At the same time, policies about aiding the re-socialization of diagnosed mental illness patients should be implemented.

### 6. Conclusion

With the new era approaching, society is responding with coexisting values, shocking each individual with dozens of views that might be attractive yet confusing. Young people with an immature self-identity can be easily confused by each other's reasoning, pondering their path, while diminishing collectivism pushes them away from traditional exterior emotional support. They are, therefore, boxed up in an island of isolation formed by strong individualism, struggling to find their way out while obstacles like the stigma of mental illness hinder their attempt to seek help, along with the urge of intensive competition. Cultural factors are often considered the most difficult to change among the causes of mental health problems due to their deeply ingrained nature. But we are glad to find out that lots of mental programs in real life have been set into motion in response to our identified sources of mental illness. The "Time to Change" program that was launched in England concerning discrimination and stigma against mental illness was dedicated to public education about mental illness (Henderson & Thornicroft, 2009). So, although it's challenging to fix the problems brought by irreversible cultural change, the trauma of our generation can be sealed in history with everyone's dedication.

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