

Study on the Emergence and Intervention of Mental Health Problems among Chinese Adolescents

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Abstract:

The mental health of Chinese adolescents has received widespread attention due to the rising rate of adolescent suicide. Although previous studies have focused on the causal analysis of such problems, there is still room for further improvement. This study examines the impact of mental health problems from four distinct perspectives in Chinese society. Specifically, cognitive, psychological, behavioral, and physical effects. Then, this study analyzes the causality of mental health problems from three different aspects of adolescents' daily lives: school-related causality, family-related causality, and peer-related causality. On this basis, the paper makes the following recommendations: Students can develop time management and self-control skills to reduce stress in a high-pressure educational system. Parents and peers can provide emotional support and counseling to help students experiencing emotional distress. Parents, in particular, can aim to create a harmonious family environment to ensure the mental well-being of adolescents. Schools can create a harmonious school environment and build healthy peer relationships to prevent bullying behavior.

Keywords: Mental health problems; Chinese adolescents; cause-effect analysis; intervention suggestions

1. Introduction

The incidence of youth suicide has received much attention because of its high prevalence worldwide. A recent cross-national study reported a global youth suicide rate of 3.8 suicides per 100,000 people, with more older adolescents as victims [1]. These conditions are even more devastating in China, where the suicide rate quadrupled from 2010 to 2021 [2]. The increasing number of reports on the prevalence of mental health problems among adolescents has rendered researching and safeguarding adolescent mental health problems crucial to promoting the overall mental health of Chinese society. To investigate the emergence of mental health problems, it is necessary to examine their causal factors. Generally regarded as the most academically demanding country, China motivates its adolescents to work hard academically from an early age. The Chinese National Entrance Examination, the gaokao, will bring about potential mental health problems for students to outperform [3]. Indeed, a stressful academic environment will subtly affect students during less competent moments. As a result, the Chinese government has adopted the double reduction policy to reduce the academic pressure that compulsory education places on children and to pay more attention to their mental health [4]. In addition, the findings of Luo et al. suggest that

school bullying is associated with many mental health problems, such as anxiety, among Chinese adolescents [5]. School bullying is a widespread problem in many parts of the world, and bullying incidents can take many forms, with covert forms rarely noticed by adults. As a result, students may not be able to seek help from those around them when faced with bullying, which can pose a challenge to their mental health. Although there have been previous studies on the causes of adolescent mental health problems, there is still room for further research. Therefore, this study comprehensively analyzes the causes of adolescent mental health problems in China and proposes intervention methods to alleviate these problems. This study adopts a multi-perspective research approach to explore the impact of non-suicidal mental health problems from four perspectives: cognitive, psychological, behavioral, and physiological effects of mental health problems, to gain a comprehensive understanding of Chinese adolescents' mental health problems. This allows students to recognize potential mental health problems in themselves or those around them and seek professional help promptly.

2. Manifestation of Mental Health issues

Suicide attempts have received increased attention worldwide as the second leading cause of death among

adolescents is highly correlated with prior emotional disorders [6]. In recent years, mental health problems have become more prevalent in China as a result of rapid social and economic development in the post-pandemic period, which can negatively affect adolescent life in all aspects [7]. From a cognitive perspective, mental health problems may cause adolescents to have concentration problems and memory loss in their daily academic lives. The absence of these two key aspects of academic life will greatly hinder adolescents' academic performance. Specifically, Chinese adolescents with mental health problems may have low academic performance in major exams due to their inability to concentrate and memorize [8]. Psychologically, non-suicidal mental health problems can cause adolescents to experience large emotional disturbances, such as persistent sadness with suicidal thoughts, excessive worry about anticipated future events, and continuous mood swings between mania and depression. Moreover, mental health problems are associated with persistent low energy, accompanied by constant fatigue and lack of motivation. Behaviorally, mental health problems may also induce behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, as well as aggressive behavior toward others in adulthood [8,9]. In addition, mental health problems can keep adolescents from socializing by distancing them from friends. This can lead to deterioration of their condition due to lack of peer and professional support. According to Zhang et al., stress also contributes to potential sleep disorders in adolescents [7]. Lastly, mental health issues may also bring about physical pain such as headache, sudden dizziness, and stomachache caused by no pathogenic factors. The impact of these four mental health issues has laid the groundwork for the heightened interest in mental health issues among Chinese youth in recent years.

3. Causal Analysis

3.1 School

Having examined the impact of mental health problems, this paper explores the causes of mental health problems from three major aspects of adolescents' daily lives: school, family, and peer relationships. This section explores the causes of school-related mental health problems among adolescents from two different aspects: peer pressure and the Chinese education system.

3.1.1 Peer pressure

To begin with, peer pressure arises from competition with peers in a social environment. It is particularly prevalent in post-pandemic China, which experienced a severe economic recession that led to the devaluation of academic qualifications. The National Bureau of Statistics of Chi-

na (NBS) reported a peak youth unemployment rate of 21.3% in June 2023, after which the data was temporarily suspended for improvements [10]. As a result, such a high unemployment rate has led students to compete more intensely to increase their competitiveness in school and the job market. Specifically, in school, students compete not only for grades but also for the number of extracurricular activities they participate in and the awards they receive. In contrast, in the job market, teenagers compete for internships and titles that demonstrate their workability. But even so, in competition, whether with innate talent or acquired support, someone is always better. Hence, less competitive students may develop a negative view of themselves, which can lead to potential mental health problems such as anxiety from excessive fear of not achieving anything in the future.

3.1.2 Education system

In addition, the academic stress caused by China's education system is also one of the triggers of adolescent mental health problems. In particular, the Gaokao, also known as the Chinese National Entrance Examination, is unanimously regarded by the entire society as the most important standardized test for students. It is even referred to by many as "an exam for life. As a result, many students from economically disadvantaged families rely on it for admission to prestigious universities and the opportunity to "climb the social ladder" and "change their destiny. In addition, China's large population and the selection of students by grades to enter colleges and universities of different levels make the competition even more intense. Therefore, in this academically oriented country, society has high expectations for Chinese teenagers to excel in college entrance exams [3]. Meanwhile, the emphasis on examinations in the Chinese education system also forces adolescents and their families to invest a lot of time in academic achievement for personal development. Adopting the findings of Jiang et al., academic stress is positively associated with mental health problems in adolescents [11]. Indeed, standardized tests such as the gaokao do cause psychological problems such as anxiety due to the inability to meet expectations and often a sense of despair about oneself [3].

3.2 Household

3.2.1 Family relationship

Family relationships are critical to building a mentally healthy environment for students. Liu et al. emphasized that quarrelsome marital relationships inevitably undermine adolescents' psychological security, which in turn leads to mental health problems [12]. Lack of psychological security can lead to insecurity in family relationships

and reduce trust in parents, thus damaging parent-child relationships. Zhang et al. showed that negative parental relationships are one of the risk factors for the development of mental health problems [7]. Negative parental relationships can hinder the formation of future social relationships (e.g., friendships and romantic relationships) and isolate the child from society because the child is unable to build trust with those around him or her from an early age. As a result of the inability to form healthy social relationships, adolescents develop mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, and a sense of helplessness in society without outside help. In addition, in families where the quality of marital relationships is low, children may imitate the harmful behaviors of their parents and develop a tendency to engage in aggressive behavior toward others in adulthood. Such tendencies can have a destructive effect on the adolescent's future life, such as the possibility of criminal behavior.

3.2.2 Childhoods trauma

In addition, childhood trauma in the form of parental neglect is a major cause of mental health problems. For children from economically disadvantaged families, parents often migrate to metropolitan areas in search of employment opportunities, resulting in a lack of parental involvement for these children during their childhood. In addition, some parents see little point in returning and abandon their children to start a new life. These left-behind children may blame themselves for their parents' decision to leave, leading to feelings of guilt. As a result, they may exhibit low self-esteem and depressive symptoms as a result of parental abandonment. In adulthood, these conditions may be exacerbated by a lack of professional support, which is often costly for economically disadvantaged children. Indeed, according to Downey et al., adolescents may abuse alcohol and drugs as a way of preventing the effects of traumatic childhood experiences on their lives, which is supported by the findings of Song et al., who found a positive association between child maltreatment and depressive symptoms [9,13].

3.3 Social/Peer Relationship

Finally, peer relationships are also a cause of mental health problems among Chinese adolescents. Social relationships also play a significant role in the formation of a healthy psychological state among Chinese adolescents. In particular, inappropriate peer interactions and peer behaviors, such as school bullying, where a group of students physically or verbally abuse one student, may contribute to the psychological insecurity of bullied children. This is supported by Lai et al. who found that adolescents who experience school bullying are associated with the

development of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety [14]. Victims of bullying are more likely to develop excessive worry about themselves and their social relationships. This can lead to social isolation as adolescents avoid social interactions to avoid being bullied. In addition, bullying behavior tends to take less obvious forms, ranging from subtle name-calling to unintentional looks. This makes it more difficult for adults to recognize bullying behavior and provide appropriate help to those in need. Particularly in China, academic performance is seen by teachers and parents as the only measure of a student's character. In other words, students with high test scores are often considered "good students," while less able students are less favored. This means that when adolescents with good academic performance inflict bullying behavior on others, the victims may find it difficult to seek help because their test scores are "below average" and few people will believe them. Furthermore, because Chinese-style parents view adolescents as "innocent children," they may view school bullying as simply children playing without malicious intent, often ignoring children who are being bullied and need support. Parents may even turn away children who seek help, saying things like, "How come they bully you and not others?" Chen et al. found that parental behavioral control was negatively correlated with bullying victims [15]. Thus, without parental understanding, victims of bullying may find it difficult to seek help and may experience greater emotional turmoil. Moreover, in cases of bullying, children who are being bullied are prevented from getting help from adults because there is no evidence. Especially in schools where the use of electronic devices is not allowed, it is even more difficult to obtain evidence. In the absence of evidence, the bullied child may even be punished by being rumored to be the bully. Given all these factors, children who are bullied at school are more likely to experience mental health problems. A study by Wen et al. showed this positive association [16].

4. Suggestions

As mentioned above, mental health problems among Chinese youth can be caused by a variety of factors. Therefore, mitigating these problems is crucial to promoting China's overall mental health and reducing the youth suicide rate. This section offers suggestions on how to prevent and alleviate mental health problems caused by the three factors mentioned above.

First, to resist the high pressure of the college entrance examination, self-control is an effective means of relieving stress and anxiety. According to the findings of Fu, time management and an organized study plan were the most

effective among high school students. Studying efficiently can lead to a significant reduction in students' stress levels [3]. Self-control has been shown to help reduce academic stress and minimize negative emotions while improving academic performance [11]. Therefore, adolescents need to develop time management skills to cope with stress. In addition, social support from family and friends is critical to alleviating mental health problems. Parents can be emotionally supportive and consult with professionals to help students cope with moments of emotional turmoil. Friends and peers can offer advice and companionship to students in distress. Talking to peers with similar experiences creates a sense of belonging that helps heal harmful emotions [3]. In addition, schools need to be staffed with highly trained professional mental health counselors to support children when they are in emotional distress. None of China's public schools are staffed with counselors, which may cause teenagers to hide their true emotions and eventually cause mental health problems due to the accumulation of too many negative emotions. Therefore, with an enlightened mental health counselor, teenagers can express their emotions and receive professional feedback and advice to minimize mental health problems. In terms of addressing bullying in schools, the findings of Li et al. emphasize the need for school administrators to strengthen interpersonal relationships in schools. Indeed, as the most direct mediator between the bully and the victim, school intervention in peer relationships is the most effective means of prohibiting bullying behavior [17]. At home, parents can create a harmonious family environment and build understanding with their children by exerting less pressure. In this way, children who are bullied at school will be more likely to seek help from their parents and ultimately avoid mental health problems. The above recommendations are only a few suggestions based on the three causal factors that can trigger mental health problems in adolescents. Therefore, this is not to say that emotional distress can be dealt with simply by following the above recommendations, as alleviating mental health problems requires multiple efforts and support.

5. Conclusion

Finally, the paper provides a causal analysis of the mental health problems of Chinese adolescents and offers suggestions to address the three causes mentioned above. In the first part, the study examined the effects of mental health problems from four aspects: cognitive, psychological, behavioral, and physiological. It showed that mental health problems not only lead to memory loss and major mood disorders but also to aggressive tendencies and pain without pathological causes. The study then analyzed the caus-

es of mental health problems among Chinese adolescents from the perspectives of school, family, and peer relationships. School-related causes emphasized peer pressure and China's high-pressure education system. Family-related causes emphasized family relationships and childhood trauma. Peer relations, on the other hand, focused on school bullying and victimization. Finally, the paper explores possible solutions to eliminate and mitigate mental health problems among Chinese adolescents from the perspective of each contributing factor. Specifically, students should develop self-control and time management skills to increase productivity and reduce stress. Parents and peers should provide help and support to students in need through meaningful communication so that they can experience a sense of belonging. Schools should help build healthy social relationships to prevent bullying in schools.

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