

A Comprehensive Strategy to Address Anxiety and Depression among Young People

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Abstract:

Anxiety is defined as anxiety, nervousness, or restlessness caused by the anticipation of internal and external dangers. Adolescent depression and anxiety are a global problem, with WHO data showing that 14% of young people aged 10-19 face mental health problems worldwide. Depression and anxiety in adolescents are complex diseases that arise from the interaction of multiple factors, including biological, psychological, socio-cultural, and social factors. Adolescent depression and anxiety can be solved through proper measures. We propose a multi-pronged approach to address this mental health crisis, along with actionable solutions from principally the physical and psychological aspects. We aim to mitigate the negative consequences and foster an environment where young people can thrive emotionally, academically, and socially.

Keywords: young people; adolescence; mental health; pressure.

1. Introduction

Imagine a young person sitting in every seat in the classroom. Young people are engaged in an invisible war, ranking, comparing, and struggling under pressure in various aspects. This is not only an imagination but also a reflection of reality - today's young people are facing increasing pressure, which is causing more and more young people to suffer from depression and anxiety. This is a silent crisis that threatens the future of this generation of young people.

As we delve into this phenomenon, one imperative question emerges: Can we tackle this prominent issue, and if so, how shall we start? According to the latest data published by the World Health Organization (WHO), it is estimated that 1 in 7 (14%) 10–19-year-olds experience mental health conditions globally, yet these remain largely unrecognized and untreated (Griffin 1990). This alarming trend not only underscores the prevalence of these conditions but also the vast scope of young lives left in vulnerability. In this essay, the term 'young people' refers to individuals aged 15 to 24, encompassing late childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood (United Nations). Adolescent depression and anxiety can be solved through proper measures. We propose a multi-pronged approach to address this mental health crisis, along with actionable solutions from principally the physical and psychological aspects. We aim to mitigate the negative consequences and foster an environment where young people can thrive

emotionally, academically, and socially.

2. Depression and Anxiety among Young People

Depression and anxiety in adolescents are complex diseases that arise from the interaction of multiple factors, including biological, psychological, socio-cultural, and social factors. Biologically, neurobiological processes are responsible for what is known as the "depressive state." Genetic variations have been demonstrated to result in heightened responsiveness of the amygdala, resulting in increased responsiveness towards negative events and a bias towards negative attention (Dean and Keshavan, 2017).

The rising rates of depression and anxiety among young people present serious challenges, including persistent feelings of sadness, despair, and excessive worry. The long-lasting symptoms would potentially impair the development of adolescents in many aspects, including psychological, physical, academic, and cognitive aspects (Nixon 2014). This alarming trend is evident in a decade-long study by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) in the United States, which assessed a large scale of 16,7783 adolescents aged 12 to 17 on a one-year basis. In the ten years from 2009-2019, the incidence of depression among this demographic nearly doubled, from 8.1% to 15.8% (Wilson and Dumornay, 2022). Specifically, high school students with high levels of anxiety may perform poorly in school, followed by lower confidence lev-

els, struggles in social interaction, and consequently more pronounced depressive symptoms. Young people who were suffering from depression had difficulties in dealing with their academic duties. There is an indispensable correlation between academic difficulties and the severity of anxiety and depression in adolescents. A concerning number of adolescents who are struggling significantly in various school subjects are also experiencing high levels of depression, ranging from 30% to 64% (Fröjd et al. 2007). Geographically, over 9 million Chinese teenagers could be experiencing depression or anxiety, exceeding that in other countries (Zhou et al. 2023). The shift in statistics highlights a growing epidemic that demands immediate attention.

3. Potential Causes of Depression and Anxiety among Youth

To control the further spread of depression and anxiety among adolescents, we must explore the reasons behind the widespread existence of this problem. Adolescents are navigating the fifth stage, known as ‘identity versus role confusion.’ (Erikson, 1994). This stage, occurring roughly between the ages of 12 and 18, involves exploring independence and developing a sense of self. During this stage, adolescents face developmental conflicts, question “Who am I?” and learn more about their goals, beliefs, and abilities (Kendra 1). For example, teenagers at this stage (secondary school) often struggle with being a student and have an increasing desire to gain independence and autonomy. Further exploration of depression and anxiety is essential to help teenagers successfully navigate through this critical period.

The increase in depression and anxiety rates is also closely connected to distinctive contemporary pressures like changed sleep schedules, widespread digital media usage, and major world events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which have jointly created a fresh set of mental health difficulties. It has been corroborated that academic performance is negatively correlated with the level of anxiety and depression (Shokrgozar et al.2019). Moreover, untreated mental health conditions in youth can lead to long-term consequences, including academic underachievement, substance abuse, and increased risk of suicide, highlighting the critical need for timely and effective interventions (Molina and Pelham, 2014). Between 2000 and 2018, the suicide rate among youth ages 10 to 24 rose from 6.8 per 100,000 to 10.7 per 100,000 (Curtin, 2020). This issue is paramount due to its profound impact on individuals’ well-being, societal productivity, and healthcare systems.

This focus on negative events causes cognitive distortions

like personalization, overgeneralization, and exaggeration, resulting in unhealthy beliefs about self-value and acceptance. Imbalances in neurotransmitters such as serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine are strongly linked to depression and anxiety. The interference with these monoamine neurotransmitters could also impact the activity of their receptors and the receptors located further down the pathway, which led to more severe symptoms and social function deficits, high suicide rates, and chronic disease conditions.

Psychologically, youth with depression and anxiety have a higher possibility of exhibiting negative thinking patterns. For example, most depressed adolescents tend to catastrophize, which means they always expect the worst things to happen. In addition, adolescents will ruminate and repetitively focus on negative thoughts. Furthermore, Youth with depression and anxiety have a higher possibility of holding negative self-evaluation and low self-worth. This situation can be exacerbated by academic pressure, criticism, and social expectations. The pressure imposed on teenagers will finally lead to vulnerability to depression and anxiety. Emotional management would be a problematic affair for adolescents.

From the viewpoint of social comparison theory, individuals are motivated to assess themselves through comparison with others without clear criteria for self-evaluation. Constant exposure to idealized images and lifestyles on social media can lead to unrealistic comparisons, including physical appearance. The abundance of selected photos, videos, and stories on social media like Instagram provides a platform for people to compare with others. Research demonstrated that social comparison was directly associated with greater comparison with “ideals” and negative feelings about one’s body image.

4. Traditional Methods of Addressing Depression

Traditional solutions for adolescents with anxiety and depression may involve physical exercise, lifestyle management, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), and medication. Lifestyle interventions contain strategies to improve physical activity, dietary patterns, and sleep. Physical activity is effective in improving different levels of depressive disorders and symptoms. For those with mild to moderate depression symptoms, engaging in regular moderate-to-vigorous physical activity can leverage the mood of young people who are suffering from depression and anxiety (Hardin et al., 2020). Even brief periods of exercise can have a positive impact on mental wellbeing (Chekroud et al., 2018).

Observational studies have demonstrated a link between

unhealthy eating habits and increased severity of depression symptoms (Orlando et al., 2022). Research reveals that a higher dietary sugar intake in American adults is positively related to a higher prevalence of depression (Zhang et al., 2024). A diet rich in vegetables, fruits, and legumes but low in sugary drinks, processed foods, and meats contributes to the reduction in depressive symptoms among adults with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). In terms of sleeping patterns, adequate sleep helps regulate neurotransmitters; it can help stabilize the mood and balance these chemicals, reducing mood disorders. Quality sleep improves cognitive functions such as attention, memory, and decision-making. Sleeping enough can help break the negative thinking pattern. Furthermore, good sleep can support physical well-being, reducing physical symptoms like fatigue and somatic complaints.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is acknowledged as the most effective psychotherapy for treating depression in adolescents so far, as supported by strong evidence (Méndez et al.2021). This method focuses on addressing the cognitive distortions, negative intrusive thoughts, and behavioral symptoms of depression (Walter et al., 2023). Identifying and challenging schemas, automatic thoughts, and cognitive distortions that view experiences too negatively is the main focus of the cognitive component. It is important to recognize one's distortions in thinking that are creating problems and then reevaluate them while considering reality. Improving comprehension of the actions and drive of other individuals. Applying problem-solving abilities to deal with challenging circumstances. Acquiring the skills to boost self-assurance in one's capabilities. The behavioral aspect of CBT focuses on adjusting behavior patterns, including encouraging a proactive way of confronting fears rather than evading them and learning how to soothe the mind and unwind the body (Kazdin and John, 2002). Overall, cognitive behavioral therapy for teenagers with depression focuses on improving cognitive and behavioral abilities required for building and sustaining positive relationships, as well as managing emotions.

5. New Methods on Addressing Depression

Due to the constantly changing environment and the recent infiltration of anxiety and depression among adolescents, new adaptation methods and solutions are constantly being proposed. Educational institutions in different areas, including both developed and developing countries and areas, have begun to introduce mental health programs and initiatives to demystify and destigmatize mental health issues. These initiatives include incorporating mental health education into the curriculum, providing

access to school counselors, and organizing peer support groups. Certain schools have implemented extensive mental health protocols and established secure environments for students to access assistance without facing judgment. Awareness campaigns, mental health days, and workshops are becoming increasingly prevalent, indicating a positive trend toward acknowledging mental health as a crucial aspect of overall wellness.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the escalating mental health crisis among young people demands urgent and comprehensive intervention. The increasing rate of depression and anxiety in young people is a complex issue that requires immediate attention and action. The reasons stem from an intricate combination of biological, psychological, sociocultural, and social factors. Dealing with this quiet emergency necessitates a holistic strategy involving conventional strategies like cognitive-behavioral therapy, lifestyle management, and physical activity, along with creative answers designed for the distinct difficulties we face today.

Throughout the essay, multifaceted approaches were presented, including integrating school-based psychology education programs, lifestyle management, and psychotherapy into the support systems and school. By setting up school-based programs, lecturing on depression, and organizing more social events or clubs, teens can connect with people who understand what they are going through. Schools play a crucial role in this effort, as they are the main places where teenagers spend most of their time. Educational institutions need to establish strong mental health initiatives, raise awareness, and offer sufficient support systems to foster safe environments for young individuals to access assistance without judgment. Comprehending and dealing with the root factors of depression and anxiety while advocating for positive psychology concepts like self-efficacy, self-esteem, resilience, and identity can create a space where young people can flourish emotionally, academically, and socially.

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