

# Depression and Mindfulness among Adolescents with Parental Divorce

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**Abstract**— Adolescents with divorced parents have more vulnerability to experience mental health problems, particularly depression. This study aims to describe the level of depressive symptoms in adolescents with parental divorce and its correlation with mindfulness. Mindfulness is defined as awareness and paying attention about various personal feelings, thoughts, and events without judging. The study was conducted using quantitative approach and cross-sectional design. We used the Center of Epidemiology Studies for Depression-Revised (CESD-R) scale to measure depression symptoms and the Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale (MAAS) scale to measure trait mindfulness. The study participants were 85 adolescents from divorced parents aged 12-20 years. Samples were taken by purposive sampling technique and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson-Product Moment correlation test. The results indicated that the majority of participants showed symptoms of depression that is considered clinically significant. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the symptoms of depression among them. Furthermore, the correlation test showed that mindfulness is strongly negatively correlated with depression symptoms. It was found that the higher the mindfulness, the lower the symptoms of depression they experienced. This finding shows that while the symptoms of depression are quite high among adolescents with divorced parents, mindfulness can be considered as one of the factors that need to be considered in helping them to deal with their symptoms of depression.

**Keywords**—*depression, mindfulness, adolescents, divorce, parents*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Family is a primary foundation of children's development. Thus, a functional and harmonious family becomes one of the important parts in mental health. Unfortunately, the divorce rate in Indonesia shows an increasing trend from year to year. Based on data from the Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) in 2014, the number of divorce reached 344.237 cases and in 2015 reached 347.256 cases. Java Island was ranked highest in divorce cases in 2014 with amount of 243.847 cases and in 2015, there are 234.254 cases. In Java, DKI Jakarta occupies the fourth highest position of divorced cases, the rate in 2014 is 10.431 cases and in 2015 up to 10.303 cases [1]

Adolescent is the most vulnerable period to the effects of divorce from parents [2]. They will experience various emotional reactions because they have to lose one of their

parents [3]. As a period that is vulnerable to an identity crisis, the level of identification of parents from childhood to adolescence plays an important role in the formation of their identity. This is because the behavior and attitudes of parents are the main source of identification for adolescents, which then identifies them as a component of their identity formation [4]. Therefore, parental divorce which can result in the loss of one parent figure will also have an impact on the search for adolescents' identity. Other psychosocial impacts that occur include anger at the circumstances and parents, loss of security, depression, feeling unloved, self-blaming, and thinking that the situation occurs because of them, withdrawing from the environment, until suicide [5].

There are interviews and observations from previous studies to adolescents aged 15-16 years with parental divorce. The results of these observations are teenagers with divorced parents feel a variety of negative effects, such as feeling sad, worried about the future, feeling useless, experiencing sleep disorders, and intend to commit suicide [6]. The results of the preliminary research from observations conducted by other researchers also showed that there were symptoms of depression in adolescents with divorced parents [7]. The signs of depression occurred in changes in mood or loss of interest in doing all activities, sad, unhappy, fussy, complaining, and irritable [8].

Furthermore, it has been noticed that, the prevalence of emotional disorder, including depression, is quite prominent in Indonesia. For instance, the 2013 Riskesdas data shows the prevalence of mental emotional disorders indicated by symptoms of depression and anxiety for ages 15 years and over reaching around 14 million people or 6% of the total population of Indonesia [9]. In addition to the high prevalence, depressive disorders experienced by adolescents cannot be ignored and left without treatment. Untreated early depressive symptoms can bring to the more severe depression disorder even suicide. Because of the impact of depressive symptoms on adolescents' psychosocial functions, it is important to examine the level of depression in adolescents with divorced parents as a means of mapping the urgency of treating depression in this population. Thus, the first main objective of this research is to investigate the level of depressive symptoms among this population.

Despite the vulnerabilities to have emotional problem, there are also evidence which shows that not all adolescents with divorced parents have difficulties in their personal growth. For example, from several studies on adolescents

with divorced parents it was found that they turned out to have high self-acceptance, where they could accept their weaknesses and strengths and be able to recognize and understand themselves positively [10, 11]. This indicates that there are protective psychological factors for the emergence of depressive symptoms. Thus, besides mapping the level of depressive symptoms among teenagers with divorced parents, it is also important to know the protective factors of depressive symptoms in this population.

Research shows that several factors that can relate to the appearance of depressive symptoms include: genetics, early childhood experiences, neurobiochemical factors, behavioral patterns, dysfunctional cognitive appraisals, and poor emotion regulation [12]. In cognitive-behavioral theory which is the main model in therapy for depression, it was found that negative appraisals or schemes as well as the existence of rumination due to past stressful events can be associated with higher occurrence of depression [13]. For this reason, adolescents need a condition to fully accept all the experience and emotions that are felt without judgment by being present in this moment. The ability to act consciously and accept all feelings and experiences in the present moment is called as mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a condition characterized by openness and acceptance of experience [14]. It is a sense of full attention that occurs in various activities [15]. However, it is important to distinguish between the dispositional mindfulness and trait mindfulness [16]. Most of the literature has focused on increasing the state of mindfulness, such as through meditation training [14]. However, mindfulness has also been tested as a natural attribute. Trait mindfulness is the individual differences to be fully attend in the present moments without judgment and is assessed through a self-report questionnaire, such as the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) [14].

Some previous research has shown a negative relationship between mindfulness and depression in the community sample of adolescents. In this regards, research found that when adolescents becomes more aware and accept various thoughts and feelings, they will tend to have lower symptoms of depression [17]. However, to what extent mindfulness is also associated with depression in adolescents with divorced parents still needs further investigation. Thus, the second aims of the study are to investigate whether depression level among adolescents with divorced parents is correlated with mindfulness.

## II. RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a quantitative approach, cross-sectional design, with descriptive and correlational or associative research design.

The sampling technique was purposive sampling. We distributed online and paper-pencil questionnaire to targeted population. The characteristics of subjects are adolescents who experience parental divorce, aged 12-21 years, and live in the Jakarta area. In this case, the Jakarta area was chosen because of the high divorce rate in DKI Jakarta which reached 10.431 cases in 2014 and 10.303 cases in 2015

(bps.go.id, 2015). After the data is collected, data processing and data analysis are carried out.

Data collection obtained 85 samples of adolescents with divorced parents living in Jakarta. From demographic analysis, subjects were mostly aged between 16-18 years ( $M = 17.05$ ,  $SD = 2.059$ ) and female (68.2%). Based on the data about history of parental divorce, it is reported that average age when parental divorce occurs is 9 years old. The duration of parental divorce is more than 5 years ago. Most adolescents (35.3%) do not know the cause of their parents' divorce. Furthermore, most teenagers live with their mothers after divorce and most teenagers also have irregular interactions with parents who do not live with them.

To measure depressive symptoms, we used CESDR-10 (Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale Revised-10) [18] consisting of 10 items. CESDR-10 measuring instruments have been previously adapted by other research [19] and shown good validity and reliability index ( $\alpha = .83$ ,  $r.it = 0.43 - 0.66$ ). For the mindfulness, we use MAAS (Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale) consisting of 15 items. This scale consists of 8 items of awareness dimension and seven items on the dimensions of attention [14]. This instrument was previously adapted in other study about mindfulness in adolescents. The results of the pilot study produced good item validity and high reliability coefficients ( $\alpha = .910$ ,  $r.it = 0.413 - 0.808$ )

The data analysis technique used in this study is the descriptive statistics and Pearson Product Moment correlation test which was calculated using the SPSS 23.0 statistical software.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### A. Level of Depression Among Adolescents With Divorced Parents

To examine the level of depression, we used cut-off point of 8 to define individuals who are indicated to have depressive symptoms in clinical significance level. This cut-off point is based on the recommendation from CESD-R. Based on the analysis, it was found that the level of depressive symptoms in adolescents with divorced parents was mostly (58.82%) in the category of clinical significance (sub-threshold until major depressive disorder). Only around 41.18% who were not categorized as having depression.

Depression itself is a mental health problem characterized by changes in individuals cognitive and behavior accompanied by fatigue, loss of energy, and disruption of sleep patterns [20]. In addition, according to the DSM-V, depression has the characteristics of feeling sad, empty, and despair. Other symptoms are significant weight loss without any diet, loss of appetite, sleep problems, psychomotor changes, no energy, feelings of guilt, worthless, having problems in thinking and concentration skills, problems in decision making, and the emergence of suicidal thoughts [8]. Finding of this study indicates that the level of depressive symptoms among adolescents with parental divorce seem higher compared to adolescents in community sample that was studied before [19].

There are factors that cause depression, namely, genetic factors, environmental factors, negative events in life, as well as personality, temperament, and vulnerabilities [21]. Adolescents from divorced parents are risk to have depression symptoms parental divorce might be a significant stressful live events that they experienced early in life. It is assumed that this significant loss and stress can trigger negative schema and rumination that can be followed by depression.

#### B. Correlation of Depression and Mindfulness

The correlation results show that mindfulness is strongly negatively correlated with the depression symptoms ( $r = -0.661$ ,  $p = 0,000$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). It means that if these adolescents have higher mindfulness, it will be followed by less depressive symptoms. In this regards, the more adolescents with divorced parents can accept the positive and negative experiences as person coming from divorced family, they will feel less depressed. Supporting another finding among Indonesian community adolescents that found negative correlation between mindfulness and depression [17], this current study suggests that even among adolescents with significant stressful live events, mindfulness bring positive impact on their depression level. Therefore, it can be concluded that trait of mindfulness seems can be potential protective factors from depression, not only among normative adolescent population, but also for vulnerable population, such as they are with parental divorce.

Mindfulness is an attention and awareness of the "current" events and experiences [14]. It is a sense of consciousness that can arises with openness [22] and acceptance of experiences [14]. Among general community sample, it was found that the trait of mindfulness correlates with well-being indicators such as positive affect, life satisfaction, self-esteem, optimism, and self-actualization [14]. Another study also found that mindfulness positively related to self-acceptance [23] and among students it was found correlated with self-acceptance [24]. It is assumed that openness to all experiences that occurred followed by mindfulness can create self-acceptance, where adolescents can have more positive feeling and perspective about themselves, even when significant loss such as parental divorce happened in life. Mindfulness can bring many positive effects [25] that can bring benefit for their psychological condition. This positive feeling about themselves might bring buffering effects of negative schemata that occur among vulnerable adolescents with depression in this study.

Remind that person's personality including trait minfulness can change over time as a result of one's life experience [26], this results suggest that mindfulness can be potential to be cultivated as protective factors to overcome depression among adolescents with parental divorce. For cover the limitation on this study, future research can upgrade the research design by using longitudinal design. Future studies can also find the moderator/mediator between mindfulness and depression and choose more representative or specific sample regarding divorced parents condition.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

There are 58.82 % of adolescents with parental divorce who have depression symptoms on clinical significance level. This level is higher than adolescents from community sample. Thus, depression symptoms among this population should be noticed by clinician and parents.

However, mindfulness is found to be negatively correlated with depression. Thus, if adolescents with divorced parents have higher tendency to be mindful, they will have less depressive symptoms. Finding of this study bring implication that mindfulness-based intervention can be considered to be conducted for treating or preventing depression among these vulnerable adolescents.

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