

Analysis on Teen Anxiety with Regard to COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

With the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic becoming a normality, adolescent anxiety and mental illnesses increasingly emerge on a global scale. This thesis focuses on teenagers who are raised in a fairly favourable background but are suffering from mental problems relating to the changes of the environment during the pandemic. It summarizes the phenomenon that has occurred respectively and explores three major possible reasons: family conflicts, online studying and lack of social contact. It further brings up measures of alleviating the urgency of the condition from a macro perspective, which require governments, schools, scientists, parents and adolescents themselves to collaborate and fulfill their own responsibilities. By working according to the psychological traits of teenagers, which improves the effectiveness of treatment, solving mental issues can contribute to fighting against the virus as well.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Teenager, Anxiety, Mental health

1. INTRODUCTION

Started in December 2019, the novel Coronavirus has developed into a global pandemic, posing disastrous impacts on numerous nations and the entire mankind. From the shutting down of schools, businesses, traffic and most public places to the implementation of national home quarantine orders, the pandemic has, to some degree, brought about profound changes to people's lifestyles and routines, which have given rise to potential psychological health problems. As governments and public health care agencies are continually faced with the pressure of controlling the confirmed cases, mental health problems tend to be neglected. With the death toll accelerating and multiple Covid variants emerging unprecedentedly across the globe, experts have noted that the fight against the virus is unlikely to end for decades to come. Thus, how to coexist with the virus and deal with mental health issues in the post-epidemic era ought to be highlighted and discussed more systematically.

This article focuses on teenagers, referring roughly to those in middle school and high school, and the anxiety and other forms of psychological disorders they have developed in response to the pandemic.

Adolescence is a developmental stage of considerable physical and psychological growth and change [1]; therefore it is easier for teenagers to develop mental

health problems. The public is used to summarizing these phenomena as a normality during puberty, leaving apparent issues unattended and worsen during the health emergency of humanity. This dilemma is especially typical when teenagers, who have no particular notable predicaments such as threats from domestic violence, innate physiological handicap or poverty, are involved. It is hoped to trace the cause of teen anxiety by analysing specific conditions in the COVID-19 pandemic, so as to come up with general conclusions which can be applied universally.

2. ALARMING PHENOMENON

2.1. *Universal mild anxiety of teens'*

The overwhelming advancements of technology and unprecedentedly radical changes in all aspects of human society has unavoidably set this generation in a unique position. Adolescents of the 21st century are usually regarded lucky to be born in the material prosperity with fairly qualified educational backgrounds and a brand new view of the surroundings. Yet, the rapid development of humankind has led to enormous uncertainty which can result in a variety of mental health issues, given that physical unfitness is no longer so significant a threat in face of modern medical treatment. A report released by The China National Children's Center in 2018 noted that more than 30 million children under the age of 17 are

suffering from different forms of mild psychological issues in China and 5.2% of all children have developed obvious mental disorders [2]. Without doubt, the situation has become even more severe when it comes to teenagers living through the chaos and confusion of the spreading disease.

Schoolwork is considered the major concern for some teens, as education is almost the only way for youngsters to take command of their life paths in this era. However, with the virus prevailing on a global scale, all entities, big and small, have isolated themselves as precautions against further influence of the pandemic. Thus, channels to international-communicating and abroad-studying are blocked while domestic peer competition is intenser and development prospect is gloomier. Apart from the side effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most direct results related to this catastrophe are worries for health and safety. The “youth psychological crisis” is a concept that has come into spotlight these years. It can be defined as “the internal unbalance and agony caused by individual’s insufficiency to cope with psychological impact from emergencies and critical incidents” [3]. From this point of view, teenagers are more sensitive to the environment which means sharper responses to unpredictable changes, indicating the health crisis in this time of year. As new generations become more open-minded and concerned about the outer world, anxiety is developed not only for the security of themselves, but also for those of the society and the entire world.

2.2. Moderate or severe mental disorder for extreme cases

Mild anxiety of teenagers’ can be eased with the passage of time and the turnaround in environment, but those with depression are usually tricky to deal with. According to WHO’s recent inquiry, 200 to 400 million people worldwide are suffering from depression so far, with a prevalence of 4.4% of the whole population[4], teens included as well. For students who are generally carefree, anxiety and worry of the future are unlikely to develop into illnesses easily, nevertheless, the devastating pandemic serves to push them across that threshold and onto the desolate valley of mental illness. That is to say, the uncertainty of life is revealed more explicitly in front of them during and after this humanity’s health crisis.

Two categories can be roughly divided among the adolescent depressives in the pandemic period: the ones who had had slight symptoms beforehand and experienced deterioration of the situation afterwards, plus the ones diagnosed with depression without a clear previous warning. The former can be relevantly critical, yet the latter are relatively more worrying. Cases of teenagers, who have no necessary concerns for financial difficulties, poor grades or other negative facets, attacked by depression is a huge interruption to their normal lives and their family. In the meantime, it tends to be more

challenging to ascertain the causes of the sudden misfortune. To make matters worse, outsiders may, out of ignorance of depression, attribute their mental problems to wick mindset, hence adding to their misery. Furthermore, mental health services as well as treatment systems are disrupted or halted owing to the pandemic and lack of financial support. Either for having few places to turn to or more interfering factors, the status quo for teenage depressives is undoubtedly inconducive with the novel coronavirus raging through the globe.

3. POSSIBLE CAUSES

3.1. Family conflicts

Puberty is known as a phase full of rebellion, restlessness, and desire for independence. Unexpectedly long period of home quarantine confine teenagers to their house with parents and other generations, leading to frequent arguments and misunderstandings. The survey from Zhejiang Mass Psychological Assistance Center suggests that in April 2020, the most severe month during the pandemic, 88.8% of the consultations involved issues concerning teenagers. Among those, 17.24% are reported to have something to do with the intensification of parent-child conflicts[5].

While teenagers begin to acknowledge themselves as grown-ups with independent spirits, adults are still more comfortable to regard them as kids rather than letting go without much intervention to their lives. During the “psychological weaning period”, put forward by Hollingworth in the early 20th, teens set out to seek for equality with adults and the ambiguous conception of maturity. Unfortunately, spending more time than necessary together is a must in favor of the virus containment policy, which provides a breeding ground for misunderstanding and unwanted dispute. Schoolwork and social activities, which normally occupy teenagers’ spare time, are daily necessities for them to pursue considerable room of privacy. Given that these are no longer available, families are left with the potential of conflicts. Nowadays, parents often find themselves anxious about their offspring’s prospect and feel urgent to be well informed of details of their lives, in the names of protection and affection. These natural emotions lead to unconscious control desire, consequently triggering teenager’s further disobedience and revolt. In this way, anxiety and unpleasantness arise. Both generations fall into a vicious cycle of “anxiety--control--anti-control--more anxiety--more control”[6], intensifying family relations and threatening their mental health.

3.2. Piling schoolwork

3.2.1 Subjective factor: lack of self-discipline

During the pandemic, online education is a measure adopted globally. Statistical investigation conducted by

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) suggests that there are still 28 country-wide closures and more than 200 million affected learners around the world by February[7]. For students who can afford the cost of online studying, though with no financial burden, are more or less pestered by the demand for self-control and self-discipline.

These days, faced with fierce competition among peers, teenagers are pushed to march ahead by parents, teachers, schools and other external forces. The passive studying pattern leaves little room for their improvement in self-teaching and self-studying. As a result, the abrupt swift from live classrooms to online platforms such as Zoom, MOOC and Classin causes widespread helplessness and anxiety. With all sorts of technological devices available, students are easily confused by the dazzling temptations of computer games, online chatting, videos and other forms of recreations instead of solely concentrating on schoolwork. However, once they abandon themselves to the seemingly relaxing amusement, intangible concerns for grades and examinations are raised. Moreover, since students have no certain observation on how others are handling, fear for lagging behind results in a sense of crisis, while the lack of self-control and self-awareness block them from making positive changes. Another challenge comes from after the lockdown. Tests and rankings put many at a loss when reviewing their online-learning outcomes in comparisons with others after things are back to normal. The ability to adapt to different situations is of such significance that without it, anxiety and dismay are due to harm one's psychological state of health.

3.2.2. Objective factors: online teaching patterns

Online education during the COVID-19 outbreak is the first-ever online teaching attempt on a global scale for humanity. The lack of precedents to refer to produced enormous difficulties to educators who are confronting a great deal of unknowns and uncertainties. And for this reason, teenagers' workload skyrockets due to objective inefficiencies and drawbacks of the novel studying pattern.

For the one thing, teachers tend to make the full use of internet resources, though without doubt variegates accessible information, impose heavier burden on teens who have already been exhausted by piling schoolwork. Besides, the inconvenience of communication keeps teachers from supervising students' performances at home. And in order to keep up with normal schedule and unified arrangements, some educators assign extra tasks for students, which increases their discontent and anxiety. For another, progress made from online studying are more limited than in live classrooms. A research conducted among 15934 high school students from Mianyang, China showed that 29% are not satisfied or fully satisfied with the effectiveness of online

studying[8]. For graduating students, worries and anxieties are even more overwhelming, considering that other dilemmas like the delay of College entrance examination and less time spent reviewing at school. Certain degree of stress can boost students' motivation and improve studying efficiency, while too much pressure is counterproductive and harmful to ones psychological well-being. Thus, inappropriate use of online-teaching platforms and measures is one of the major sources of adolescent anxiety and mental illnesses during the pandemic.

3.3. Absence of social contact

3.3.1. Biological demand as homo

Nationwide lockdown and quarantine are common measures adopted by governments in favour of controlling the infected number. However, loneliness and depression which stem from social isolation and lack of interaction can hardly be cured even with the help of multifunctional social media and communication equipment. Analysing human's biological demand and dependence on social contact will enable us to interpret on a higher level the common sense of anxiety aroused during the COVID-19 pandemic, and can provide more general and comprehensive conclusions to deal with teenage psychological issues.

Taking the so-called "interaction" as cooperation would be more accurate from a revolutionary point of view. When we review human as a component in the ecosystem from a long-term perspective, it is fair to deduce that the evolution of homo sapiens is virtually the expansion of cooperation scale and the improvement of cooperation level. Human is no more than an animal in the middle of the food chain until the cognitive revolution. The latter which took place between 70,000 and 30,000 years ago is accordingly the point when human history declared its independence from biology[9]. The cognitive revolution allowed individuals to transmit larger quantities of information on surroundings, social relationships and myths that improved their collaboration skills and effectiveness. As of 9500 to 8500 BC, the agricultural revolution marked another jump of our ancestors in a collective sense and constructed different formations of human society. Rather than working in a tribe as chimpanzees with no more than dozens of members, human beings gradually develop the competence to rearrange the ecosystem by uniting individuals from every corner of the earth.

The same truth can be seen in modern society as we witness the globalization of world's economy and worldwide pandemic. So it is obvious that human beings can not survive physically or psychologically without social contact and collaboration. No wonder one can easily get depressed and anxious in solitude during the pandemic.

3.3.2. Particular need of adolescents'

For adolescents, whose social world is considerably wider than that of the younger children and more appealing than that of adults, social isolation serves as a heavy blow mentally. While going through tremendous physiological and psychological changes, teens grow more dependent on peers in nearly all aspects. Research shows that consulting and sharing personal feelings with friends and classmates is a major way for teenagers to seek mental support[10]. In other words, the lack of social interaction not only harms teenagers directly by imposing loneliness, but by blocking a vital communication channel as well.

During puberty, adolescents' dependence on adults declines. At the same time, they increasingly rely on their peers in search for senses of belonging. Professor Friedman suggested in his book that there is probably no period of life in which peer relationships are as important as they are in adolescence[11]. He put forward four conceptions: social comparison, reference groups, cliques and crowds and gender relations, from which the significance of peer contact is well presented. At home, the only viability to keep in touch with others is by means of technological devices. Though recent advancements are offering greater convenience, they are making face-to-face socialization extraordinarily challenging after getting used to this pattern. As joy from the virtual world is normally obtained with little struggle, the conversion from on-line communication to off-line would be tricky to handle for teens, which can cause general anxiety in the post-epidemic ages.

4. RESOLVING MECHANISM

4.1. Perfection of education system

The COVID-19 pandemic has rung a bell for people in the 21th century who are engaged in the luxury of amazing development of human race. As Bill Gates advocated in a TED talk, "if anything kills over 10 million people in the next few decades, it is most likely to be a highly infectious virus rather than a war". Thus, constructing a powerful response system is more insightful than being contented with mere short-term successes. How to build a flexible and effective execution mechanism shall be put at the top of the agenda.

Firstly, to cope with the abruptness of most public health crisis, collaboration of all entities is the key. Financial and political support from governments, platforms and channels opened by Internet companies, technological breakthroughs by intellectuals and overall management of schools are all crucial parts of the online-education chain. Lessons are to be learned from the coronavirus outbreak, so that timely adjustments are viable. Secondly, before the virus is utterly exterminated, the online education scheme still needs perfection.

Preparations have to be made accordingly in the face of epidemic-normalization. And all involved subjects, including teachers, students and parents, should try to prepare themselves for frequent transformations from online to offline teaching approaches. Lastly, and most importantly, educators should put more emphasis on nurturing adolescents' ability of self-teaching and avoid studying passively with little self-discipline. This would be helpful for youngsters when studying alone without companion and vital for their future development. Afterall, the best way to prevent anxiety and mental diseases is to have a strong spirit.

4.2. Prevention and assessment

There is evidence that without control, psychological health problems that first appear in adolescence are more likely to sustain till adulthood[12]. Hence, early intervention shall be underlined. To begin with, school psychological education is the first and most direct approach. However, since many school education does not target specific student groups, it serves more as publicity instead of practical resolution to teenagers' mental problem. In some schools in Beijing, a relatively developed city in China, the ratio of professional psychology instructors to students is a staggering 1:1500[13]. The lack of resources and professionals has largely limited the effectiveness of psychological educations from school, which is one urgent drawback to overcome.

In addition, scientists need to develop a more authoritative assessment mechanism on teen anxiety and depression which can be applied universally. Meanwhile, hospitals from different places have to be flexible and come up with their own measurement system suitable to local conditions, considering cultural, geographical and conventional differences. By the way, inaccurate assessments are highly probable to deteriorate ones mental state, for extra anxiety and fear can be produced by serious official diagnosis from hospitals. Therefore, doctors should take teenagers' psychological enduring capacity into consideration when drawing a conclusion and endeavour to avoid misdiagnose, for anxiety is more of a general phenomenon than illness in this age.

4.3. Sustaining the treatment channel

Medical treatment is an approach people rely the most on to recover in a short period. However, during the pandemic, accesses to proper treatment for mental health problems are mostly blocked. A WHO survey indicates that critical mental health services have been disrupted or halted in 93% of countries worldwide, while the public demand is increasing tremendously[14]. Mental health patients are particularly vulnerable in the context of COVID-19 because of their mental health difficulties and some of the long-term effects from psychotropic

medication[15]. Thus, it is worthy of noticing that treatments for pneumonia as well as mental disorder are technically closely related. Maintaining smooth channels to medical and psychological aid is obliged to be taken seriously.

4.3.1. Support volunteer projects and helplines organized by members of the society

Turning to social forces is a popular choice among those who cannot afford hospital expenses and those with mild phenomenon of anxiety or depression. Adolescents also prefer to avoid doctors out of rebellion and pride, which has made Internet guidelines especially significant. Unfortunately, such urgently-demanded platforms and services are scanty. In the Philippines, a project called Hopeline, which focus on suicide prevention and crisis assistance saw a 200% increase in calls in April 2020[16]. Loads of people flocking to the same organization is meant to reduce the quality of services, therefore more of its kind shall be involving.

4.3.2. Improve on-line treating techniques

Admittedly, psychological treatments are more capable to be conducted online than operations and physical treatments. But there are still dilemmas by means of phone and video, considering that telemedicine would not be as effective and qualified. Ensuring that patients can get systematic and consecutive therapy instead of being interfered by the pandemic is of great importance. Simple online-treating measures, like reserving on the phone shall also be available, enabling those who do not own computers to get timely treatment.

4.3.3. Call on governments for financial support

Prior to the pandemic, countries were spending less than 2 per cent of their national health budgets on mental health, noted WHO in its survey conducted from June to August 2020 among 130 countries across WHO's six regions. Although 89% of countries reported in the survey that mental health and psychosocial support is part of their national COVID-19 response plans, only 17% of these countries have taken out full additional funding to cover these programs[17]. Needless to say the status quo of worldwide chronic underfunding shall be changed. Allocating funds in support of healthy mental state of teenagers and ordinary citizens is a fundamental way to protect the most susceptible populations from the virus, which also helps in controlling the number of infectious cases. Plus, as the governments act as models of backup, they can raise the morale and unite the power in the fight against the virus.

5. CONCLUSION

Anxiety, for adolescents, is a common phenomena and is not necessarily always harmful as one can

transform pressure into motivation. However, pathological anxiety and depression would cause mental sufferings. Especially when the virus is raging across the globe, leading to block-downs and interventions to normal lives of individuals, how to deal with mental illnesses and disorders becomes a complex proposition confronting the whole world. Teenagers, as members of a special age group, are going through a period of uncertainties both psychologically and physically, so that it makes the condition trickier to handle. Thus, all resources of the society are responsible to pull together in order to guarantee the future backbone force a more positive living condition.

Teens tend to have fiercer response to emergencies and unexpected changes. According to researches, their ability to inhibit impulses is not fully developed, for the reason that prefrontal cortex is biologically immature during adolescence[18](P358). Thus, scientific measures to cope with mental problems are demanded for online school education, family education, psychological treatment mechanism, channel of social contact and so on. Adopting methods to promote prevention and assessment system of mental illness is our top choice, while proper and accessible treatment is equally crucial. Solving anxiety and mental problems is beneficial to containing the pandemic as well and should be underlined in this unprecedented humanity health crisis.

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