



Analysis of Emotional Abuse in Adolescent Relationships

Jiaying Guo^(✉)

Shanghai Pinghe School, Shanghai 201206, China
guojiaying@shphschool.com

Abstract. The mental health of adolescents has been a concern of society. Adolescents generally have high plasticity, inner sensitivity, and a desire to establish strong bonds with the outside world. They need privacy and freedom but cannot sometimes judge and think independently. Therefore, emotional abuse becomes a threat to their mental development. This research focuses on the emotionally abusive behaviors in adolescent relationships, including standard features of both victims and abusers, effects of emotional abuse on adolescents, and practical ways to solve the problem. In this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sample includes 11 adolescents between 14 and 18 years old who experienced (or are experiencing) emotional abuse in different types of relationships. Teenage victims are mentally immature, lack understanding of emotional abuse, and believe they would not be harmed by it. Emotional abusers frequently come across as attractive, mature, or even in a position of authority, and some abusers were also hurt in relationships. Emotional abuse would damage teenagers' mental health along with explicit physiological uncomfortableness. Victims should build self-imposed boundaries and self-acceptance and should actively look for help from professionals. This paper may offer some guidance for adolescents to view interpersonal relationships properly, and to help adolescents avoid emotional abuse and mitigate the effects of emotional abuse on their mental health without the intervention of medicines.

Keywords: adolescent · mental health · emotional abuse · relationships

1 Introduction

The mental health of adolescents has been a concern of society. Findings from 2021 indicate that adolescents, particularly older ones, are more vulnerable to depression and anxiety symptoms due to social isolation, a decline in peer acceptance, and other lost supports that are no longer available within communities and schools [1]. Adolescents generally have high plasticity, inner sensitivity, and a desire to establish strong bonds with the outside world. They need privacy and freedom but cannot sometimes judge and think independently. Therefore, emotional abuse becomes a threat to their mental development.

Much research has been done on abusive behaviors. One of the most representative ones is that Per Mowm Hellevik interviewed teenage victims of digital harassment,

control, surveillance, and sexual compulsion in intimate relationships and concluded that such abuses would affect teenagers' understanding of intimacy, sex, and romantic relationships [2]. However, little research targeted emotional abuse in adolescent relationships. Emotional abuse is a type of violence, including nonphysical controlling behaviors [3]. Usually, emotional abuse is believed to occur in romantic relationships. Relationships between adults and victims are typically female. The abuser may "push and pull" intermittently to make the woman happy and sad, keeping her emotions constantly fluctuating. Abusers also "suppress" females in an "unintentional" way to belittle them and lower their self-confidence, etc. [4]. Nevertheless, emotional abuse among teenagers was ignored. Also, the harm caused by emotional blackmail is not apparent or explicit, so teenagers and others would fail to determine whether they were being emotionally abused.

Thus, this research focuses on the emotionally abusive behaviors in adolescent relationships, including standard features of both victims and abusers, effects of emotional abuse on adolescents, and practical ways to solve the problem. In this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sample includes eleven adolescents between 14 and 18 years old who experienced, or are experiencing, emotional abuse in different types of relationships.

The significance of this study is to make teenagers aware of the specific manifestations of emotional abuse, to guide adolescents to view interpersonal relationships properly, and to help adolescents avoid emotional abuse and mitigate the effects of emotional abuse on their mental health.

2 Method

2.1 Research Design

This study is about emotional violence and abuse in teenage interpersonal relationships. The content of interviews mainly includes personal information, perceptions of emotional abuse, specific experiences of being emotionally abused, effects of emotional abuse, and potential ways to prevent emotional abuse. During the interviews, since the topic's content could be described less logically but more like narrative reviews, the interviews are semi-structured and in-depth. As a result, the interviews were not limited to particular questions but also were extended to open discussions broader in content. After interviewing, this research conducted a comparative analysis of the cases based on the organization and coding of the interview records, aiming to build an optimal path for mind control care in interpersonal relationships for adolescents.

2.2 Data Collection

Eighteen adolescents who are currently between 14–18 years old are interviewed, and eleven of them provided valid information. The sample of adolescents is mainly collected by contacting the ones who mentioned words related to emotional abuse online. The interview was conducted by calling interviewees and recorded in the text.

To protect the interviewees' privacy, this study coded the interviewees based on their names and genders. The first letter indicates the initials of the interviewee; the second

letter represents gender (“F” for female, “M” for male, and “N” refers to prefers not to tell); the last two numbers are the interview serial number.

3 Results and Analysis

3.1 Common Features of Victims of Emotional Abuse and Abusers

Through the interviews, this study found that adolescents who have been emotionally abused generally shared some commonalities, including their psychological traits and perceptions of emotional abuse.

Firstly, according to Yu Jiancheng from the Department of Psychology, College of Education, Shanghai Normal University, emotional blackmail is like a two-person dance: the blackmailer and the blackmailed are in an interactive mode where one is willing to abuse, and the other is willing to suffer. And emotional abuse is not easy to form without the cooperation of either party. In such a situation, the blackmailed person has a low sense of self-worth [5]. Based on this discovery, interviewees’ personalities and extent of maturity when being emotionally abused were collected.

Generally, teenage victims are not sufficiently mentally mature, which makes them vulnerable to emotional abuse. They may not form a complete system of their values and may not know how to refuse others assertively. Eight of eleven participants mentioned that they had been emotionally abused since a young age. For instance, interviewee ZM01 had been emotionally abused when he first tried to establish an intimate relationship with a female adolescent; JF04 reported that her father started to belittle her appearance when she “even had no awareness of what is beauty”; XM06 was troubled by emotional abuse throughout his whole puberty.

Another feature of victims is the lack of cognition of emotional abuse. During interviews, it was noticed that most participants could not give precise definitions of emotional abuse and did not know this phenomenon when they were emotionally blackmailed. When asked what emotional abuse is, their answers tend to be ambiguous. In addition, if emotional abuse has continued since they were too young, even if they know the concept afterward, they would fail to recognize they have been abused since they were used to their unhealthy relationships. Some adolescents may doubt if it was their problem even after recognizing emotional abuse in their relationships.

In addition, more than half of the participants believed they would not be vulnerable to emotional abuse before they experienced it. For example, interviewee CM05 said that she believed that only less intelligent people would be emotionally abused. Interestingly, participant YF03 first wanted to share another experience; however, after reading the definition of emotional abused, she suddenly became aware that her experience of being maliciously belittled in a relationship was also due to emotional abuse. And that resulted in a severe lack of self-confidence—“I dared not look up when I was walking in school”.

On the other hand, the abusers tend to be seemingly attractive to them, relatively mature, or even with some authority. As a result, teenagers may admire and feel attached to them easily. Additionally, previous studies suggested that some emotional abusers also experienced harm in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, emotional abusers also tend to be anxious and afraid of being discarded, which means emotional abuse is their way to keep the relationship and gain a sense of security [6].

3.2 Effects of Emotional Abuse

Findings in 2019 suggested that whereas emotional abuse was negatively linked with self-esteem, it was positively related to social apprehension and loneliness [7]. Likewise, this research discovered that emotional maltreatment could be disastrous to adolescents' mental health, including mood problems and some explicit physical reflections. Depress in mood, insomnia, loss of appetite, lack of motivation, and decreased confidence are common experiences after being emotionally abused. Many teenagers reported becoming anxious about forming relationships with others and were more likely to dispute with their previous friends after being emotionally abused.

It is noticed that during interviews, some participants still had significant mood fluctuations when describing how they were emotionally abused. Interviewee ZF002 was in a moderate mood when she talked about the characteristics of her teacher, saying, "He treats people gently. And he is knowledgeable and has a sense of humor in class". However, when she said later that the teacher "was like changed into a different person, and sometimes he was impatient and scolded me for being stupid" and "when I did my homework, I was panicking and could not focus, and I was nervous about the math test because I could not forget how he yelled at me", she became very depressed, and her volume of speech also gradually decreased. Similarly, participant CF05 still needed to pause the interview to relieve her emotions when referring to her past experiences, even after many years. This also reflects the profound and long-term negative impact of emotional abuse in adolescent relationships on adolescents' emotions.

Moreover, even after completely identifying emotional abuse, it is still difficult for the victimized adolescent to fully affectionally detach from the perpetrator, which makes them impossible to escape entirely. In the interview with JF004, she repeatedly complained that her father's derogatory comments about her body image deeply caused body shame and accused him of making her lose weight improperly. "The diet pills messed up my endocrine system so severely that I could only sleep a few hours a week. And extreme dieting with only one meal a day and other liquid foods made me alternate between overeating and anorexia now". However, she added at the end of the interview", but I think my father is good; maybe he does not realize that he is abusing me and likes talk too directly". Similarly, 5 of 11 interviewees reported that they have not escaped from the negative effects of being emotionally abused. Thus, the damage caused by these mind controls is ongoing.

Unfortunately, some teenagers also reported that their abusers' behavior assimilated them. Participant WN07 found that her temperament unconsciously became increasingly similar to her parents, becoming fussy and controlling. Participant WM09 also said, "I kept trying to imitate my ex-boyfriend socially like I was role-playing another version of him". Therefore, some teenage victims might transform from victims to abusers in future relationships to maintain interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, the effects of emotional abuse on adolescents vary for different people who emotionally abused them. Negative impacts of emotional abuse in family relationships last for the longest time, and the healing process would require more effort. In most cases, adolescents trust and depend on their parents intensely, as how JF004 described her father, "He belongs to the decision maker in our family, and I never doubted that my father must have the correct sense of beauty as a man who has seen many women,"

but the strong bonds with their parents also harm them. A study suggests that parental behavioral and psychological control synergistically affect Chinese teenage well-being, which has crucial implications for the evolution of the family socialization paradigm [8]. Being demeaned and abused by those closest to them damages adolescents' psychological health in their developmental stage. For those who were emotionally abused by their teachers, the negative impacts tend to relate to learning motivations. On the other hand, those who were emotionally abused in romantic relationships may have the most significant reaction when being abused, but the negative mood also disappears relatively quickly. It is predicted that this is because adolescents do not establish mature connections for intimate relationships. Therefore, even though a shift in intimacy and sexual attraction at the moment may be a great shock to adolescents, this negative emotional impact would fade as they engage in new relationships.

3.3 Ways to Avoid and Cope with Emotional Abuse

After concretely understanding the experiences of emotional abuse, this study believes that the main ways to solve emotional abuse are as the following.

To start with, awareness among adolescents and other members of society about the phenomenon of emotional abuse in interpersonal relationships should be enhanced. Since many emotionally abused adolescents are unaware that they are in an unhealthy relationship, it is essential to publicize the concept of emotional abuse. It is mentioned, "although understanding the concept would not completely protect adolescents from emotional abuse and unhealthy relationships, at least it would encourage adolescents to think that problems are not on themselves when they are harmed". This indicates that as more people learn about emotional control in relationships, adolescents would scrutinize the relationship after being hurt and thus be more likely to leave an unhealthy and unsafe relationship.

Another critical point is to construct a sense of self-imposed boundaries and self-acceptance. Eight of eleven participants mentioned that adolescents should try to notice their moods and refuse to do things that make them uncomfortable. Adolescents should stay alert if people force them to sacrifice themselves for others' feelings and needs. When they doubt if they are experiencing emotional abuse, actively communicating with people they trust is necessary. In the interviews, half of the participants realized that they were emotionally abused due to their friends' reminders. Also, they should fully love and accept themselves before entering an intimate relationship because negative labeling significantly affects the self-image of adolescents, including their deficiencies in social confidence and self-assertions [9].

On the other hand, for those who have already been emotionally blackmailed, the main focus should be minimizing the adverse effects on their mental health. Longitudinal studies confirmed that psychache has a mediation role in transitioning from emotional maltreatment to suicidal ideation. Suicidal ideation and psychiatric distress were linked to one another over time [10]. We urge adolescent victims to stay away from the abuser and to seek professional help from therapists or psychiatrists. They would help assess the psychological condition of the adolescent and find a targeted approach to help the adolescent solve the problem by combining medication and psychological counseling.

Interestingly, interviewees ZF11 and WM09 believed that emotional abuse could not be prevented. However, they think that experiencing emotional abuse once is necessary for teenagers' social development, which means it is essential to conclude experiences from unhealthy relationships to reduce the possibility of future victimization.

4 Conclusion

This research concentrated on emotionally abusive behaviors in adolescent relationships, including common characteristics of abusers and victims, the effects of emotional abuse on adolescents, and solutions to the issue. It can be concluded that teenage victims are mentally immature, lack understanding of emotional abuse, and believe they would not be harmed by emotional abuse. And the abusers frequently come across as attractive, mature, or even in a position of authority, and some abusers were also hurt in relationships. Emotional abuse would damage teenagers' mental health along with explicit physiological uncomfortableness. Victims have significant mood fluctuations because of emotional abuse but also form affectionate bonds with abusers. Also, the extents of harm are different in different types of relationships. To cope with emotional abuse, adolescents' awareness of emotional abuse should be improved; they should build self-imposed boundaries and self-acceptance; those who have already suffered from emotional blackmail should actively look for help from professionals. The importance of this study is to make teenagers aware of the specific manifestations of emotional abuse, guide adolescents to view interpersonal relationships properly and help adolescents avoid emotional abuse.

In this study, some limitations also exist. First, the sample size should be increased to find more general results. And longitudinal studies should be implemented to see more details and specific thoughts of the teenage victims if possible. Second, more technologies could be involved in future studies. For example, using MRI, people would be allowed to observe the difference in brain activities between adolescents who suffered from emotional abuse and normal ones. Also, VR skills could be involved in treating teenage victims and help them better adapt to social life.

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