



The Stress Levels Of Adolescents During The Lockdown Of The COVID-19 Pandemic Outbreak

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Abstract

This article is a review paper on the stress levels of adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic when preventative measures are implemented to reduce the spread of the virus. These measures give rise to several new societal norms, such as social distancing and wearing masks. Many find these changes to greatly affect their daily activities and make some feel stressed out. Thus, the changes from COVID-19 can be considered as one of the stressors people have to regularly face onwards. For adolescents, the education domain in life is significantly affected by the implemented preventative measures, especially the changes in learning methods from onsite learning to online or hybrid learning. As the stress level increases, people will become too stressed out and experience many negative mental and behavioral consequences. Among adolescents, a decrease in motivation and cognitive skills or drug usage are some of the consequences. Therefore, this article aims to find the correlation between COVID-19 and stress as well as how to improve conditions caused by stress.

Keywords: adolescents, COVID-19, stress

Introduction

Definition Of Stress

The term ‘stress’ was first used and popularized by Hans Selye, a prominent figure in the field of stress research, to describe the phenomenon of the non-specific strain on hospitalized patients’ bodies which resulted from their abnormal body functions. (CESH/CSHS, 2017) The term was initially used to describe the physical strain on the body. However, after physician John Mason conducted an experiment on monkeys to determine the levels of psychological stress when they experienced hunger, the term was also used to describe psychological stress. During the experiment, the monkeys’ stress levels were measured and compared using the levels of stress hormones present. The results concluded that psychological stress was also as significant as physical stress. (CESH/CSHS, 2017) Furthermore, researchers continued to conduct experiments on

different types of stressors and the resulting levels of stress hormones. Now, in the medical field, the term ‘stress’ is used to define a physical, mental, or emotional factor which can make an individual experience tension either physically or mentally. Stress can be classified into external stress and internal stress. (Davis, 2021) It is classified as such in response to the two types of factors of stress: psychological factors and physical factors. (Anxiety UK, 2021) Psychological factors are events, situations, or things that individuals find to be negative or threatening, while physical factors are the things which put physical strain on individuals’ body. (CESH/CSHS, 2017) Even though the definition of stress varies from person to person due to different factors of stress, there are common elements in these factors that cause the elevation of stress hormones. (CESH/CSHS, 2017)

Factors Of Stress

Causes or factors of stress are also referred to as stressors. Individuals' environment, psychological well-being, and some social situations are classified as psychological stressors, which are the factors that cause the development of external stress. On the other hand, illnesses or medical treatments are classified as physical stressors, which are the factors that cause the development of internal stress. (Davis, 2021; CESH/CSHS, 2017)

For younger people, psychological stressors usually include school related matters, such as academic performance and social matters, such as friends, social groups, and interpersonal relationships. As for young adults and adults in general, psychological stressors may include financial difficulties and work environment. However, people of all ages have several common stressors. Firstly, problems within the family. There might be friction within the family, such as between siblings or spouses, or with parents. Secondly, internal problems which are related to individuals' personality, mindset, or psychological well-being. For example, some people might set too high of a standard for themselves and feel stressful when they cannot reach that said standard. (Piperopoulos, 2016)

As of now, scientists are proposing further official categorizing of stressors into absolute stressors and relative stressors. Absolute stressors are universal problems that everyone who is exposed to it would interpret it as a stressor, making it an objective stressor. Relative stressors are the things that some might consider as a stressor while some would not, making it a subjective stressor. (CESH/CSHS, 2017)

Stress may be developed in response to several types of stressors at once. It may develop through a chain of events or long-term events over a long period of time due to the accumulation of multiple stressors, such as daily problems. Stress may also be developed in response to a major event in life. (Mind, 2022) These are called minor and major stressors respectively.

Stress And Education

There is a correlation between stress and education. Education can be one of the major stressors for some adolescents. Stress from education or academic stress is defined as the distress which is resulted from

academic-related matters that exceed the available resources and capabilities of individuals. Some examples of academic demands include school examination, recitations in class, progress reports, competition with classmates, and teachers and parents expectations. (*Stress And Academic Stress*, n.d.) According to a study, approximately 10-30% of students experienced academic stress. In a 2013 survey, it was reported that 31% of teens respondents felt overwhelmed and 30% felt depressed due to stress. Additionally, 36% of the teens respondents said that they often feel tired. (Bethune, 2014) According to another APA survey in 2017, it was also shown that school-related matters, career and college paths, and financial concerns were the stressors for 83%, 69%, and 65% of the teens respondents respectively. School-related stress in high school students include grades, college preparations, academic demands from teachers and parents, and keeping up with their classmates. (Smith, 2020) Stress from academic demands can make some students study until late hours, resulting in them being sleep deprived the next day and unable to pay attention in class. (*The effects of stress on high school students*, n.d.) As regards college students, according to a 2006 survey study conducted by American College Health Association, academic stress is one of the major problems for college students as it highly affects their academic performance. Out of 97,357 participants in the survey, 32% reported incomplete courses, dropped courses, or lower grades due to academic stress. The most common academic stressors for this group of college students were oral presentations, academic overload, lack of time, and examinations. (Alsulami et al., 2018) In an article by Kathleen Smith, stress can in turn lead to a decline in work effectiveness, poor academic performance, deterioration in mental and physical health, as well as a lowered quality of life. (New York University, n.d.) In the long-term, it may reduce individuals' likelihood of sustainable employment in the working environment. (Pascoe et al., 2019)

Exposure To Covid-19 And Stress

COVID-19 is an illness caused by coronaviruses which started to spread in December 2019 and eventually led to a global pandemic. The symptoms of infected patients are usually defined by common cold, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and

Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). (Mayo Clinic, 2022) So, it could be said that COVID-19 patients are under internal stress caused by physical stressors. However, the exposure to the COVID-19 situation in the context of this paper does not mean getting infected by the virus, but rather is the exposure to the societal changes resulting from the pandemic situation. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the periodic lockdown in many countries and cities. Preventative measures such as social distancing and restrictions to some public areas were implemented. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Thailand, 2020) These are all changes in the societal norms in response to the pandemic. So, societal changes resulting from the pandemic add on to the list of stressors that adolescents have to face. One such change is online and hybrid learning. Online learning is defined as the education that takes place in a virtual environment over the internet. (TopHat, 2020) While online learning has several benefits such as convenience, flexibility, and affordability, there are also negative consequences such as social isolation due to the lack of face-to-face communication. (Thompson, 2021; Tamm, 2022) As regards hybrid learning, it is defined as the education model which students spend half of their time learning online through the internet and the other half learning onsite in physical classrooms. (ViewSonic, 2021) One of the benefits that students gain from hybrid learning is access to a variety of learning resources and methods, such as digital textbooks and videos, which they can review at their own pace. Another benefit is that online students and in-person students can engage and interact with each other, creating a singular learning environment. (Boyarsky, 2021) On the other hand, some issues of hybrid learning include technical difficulties and information overload as some teachers may start over-teaching content. Additionally, some students may choose to work slowly initially, but then watch videos and read through class materials in one sitting due to the feeling of falling behind. (Winstead et al., 2022) All of these drawbacks of online learning and hybrid learning can be counted as psychological stressors because they are all situations and events that can evoke negative or threatening emotions and response from individuals.⁷ According to a mental assessment among adolescents in Thailand during the 18th-month since the start of COVID-19 pandemic, it was

reported that 28% of adolescents experienced high stress levels, 32% are at risk of depression, and 22% are at risk of suicide. According to another study conducted by UNICEF, 7 in 10 children and young people experienced a decline in their mental health as a result of the COVID-19 situation. (UNICEF Thailand, 2021)

Body

Impacts Of Stress On Mental And Emotional Health

Psychological distress can affect emotional well-being, such as belongingness, psychological motivation, cognitive skills, and learning ability. This can further lead to the deterioration of mental health and the development of serious mental illnesses such as depression. (Psychology Today, 2022) A sense of belonging is the emotional need of humans to be associated with and accepted by other members in the group which may range from family and close friends to other members of society such as peers at schools or co-workers at workplaces. (MasterClass, 2020) According to a study, results show a significant association between reduced belongingness and increased levels of psychological distress, presumably caused by the implemented preventative measures to reduce social contact. Psychological distress can also cause a decrease in motivation. Motivation is the desire and willingness one has to take and maintain goal-oriented behaviors. (Cherry, 2022) In education, motivation is important to the long-term achievements of the individual. Those who have higher motivation tend to learn more and have greater academic achievements. (Hulleman, 2018) Motivation in students is seen to decline from elementary to high-school. A 2006 survey reported that 70% of high-school dropouts were unmotivated towards learning. This lack of motivation can lead to serious consequences. Roughly 40% of high-school students are reported to be inattentive and disengaged in classes, and put little to no effort on school work. (Usher & Kober, 2011) Other traits that are affected by distress are cognitive skills and learning ability. Cognitive skills are crucial for an individual's personal development. Functions such as reading, thinking, planning, and memorizing are all cognitive skills that can affect an individual's performance in life, such as in education, which requires students to think, analyze, and learn. (The Hindu, 2021;

Ginsburg, 2018) According to researchers, chronic stress can cause the decline in cognitive skills. (Llanderal et al., 2017) It is also found that stress can lead to impairment of memory retrieval, increasing the risk of underachieving in exams. (Vogel & Schwabe, 2016) Overall, stress can reduce students' work rates and efficiency, learning ability, and concentration on school-related matters. Therefore, it can be said that stress decreases students' overall academic performance. (Ogbogu, 2017) Furthermore, depression and anxiety are also included as two of the possible psychological effects of stress. (The University of Arizona Global Campus, 2021) According to Prescott, major stressors or chronic stress can be the incidence of depression. (Cooper, 2021)

Behavioral Consequences Of Psychological Distress

Behavioral consequences of psychological distress can include a disturbance in daily schedule, substance abuse, and inability to control emotions. (Mayo Clinic, 2021) Stress can cause a change in individuals' daily schedule and their habits, such as change in sleeping patterns, eating patterns, and eating habits. Frequent outbursts of emotions, such as anger, sadness, and grief can also be seen. Some also use substances such as tobacco, alcohol, drugs, sugar, and caffeine as coping mechanisms. However, increased use of these substances may also lead to substance abuse. (New York State Office of Mental Health, 2000) According to the American Psychological Association, students of all age groups can experience excessive stress, but their response to stress may vary according to the age groups. Those in high school may display self-isolation, easily give up when experiencing difficulties, react strongly to things around them, or may turn to negative coping mechanisms such as drugs. (American Psychological Association, 2022) In another study, it was shown that substance use is considered to be one of the most frequently used methods of stress management, more specifically the use of alcohol and marijuana. It was also seen that this method was not gender specific as both male and female students reported some experiences of substance use for stress management in their interviews. However, one of the interviewees claims that the usage was not to the level of substance abuse. (New York University, 2015) As for college students, adopted coping mechanisms can be

seen to vary depending on the degree of stress. Some students chose to make attempts to deal with stress, some chose to be in denial, while some tried to distract themselves from the stressors. However, those with higher stress levels also seem to adopt unhealthy coping habits, such as substance abuse, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame. (Thompson et al., 2022) Other behavioral consequences of stress seen in college students include procrastination, negative thoughts, social withdrawal, inconsistent sleeping habits, and disordered eating. (Newport Institute, 2022)

Life Satisfaction During The Covid-19 Pandemic

There are two main theories about life satisfaction: bottom-up theories and top-down theories. (Veenhoven, & Wearing, 1991) The bottom-up theories state that an individual's experience and satisfaction in each domain of life, such as work, family and friends, health and fitness, are combined to make up the overall life satisfaction, and education is included in the work domain. The top-down theory states that the overall life satisfaction influences the satisfaction in each life domain. Regardless of the theories, the idea behind life satisfaction is individuals' overall feeling regarding their life. (Ackerman, 2018) Several studies were conducted to find out about any existing correlation between the pandemic situation and life satisfaction. In a Turkish study, it was found that the fear of COVID-19 decreases life satisfaction. (Dymecka et al., 2021) In another study, the results showed that psychological distress was found to have a strong relationship with fear and anxiety of COVID-19 and reduced life satisfaction. (Duong, 2021) This is because the pandemic induces fear and anxiety among the individuals throughout the society.

Supportive Methods That Can Be Implemented

There are many methods that one can take to relieve or cope with stress. The first method is to engage in physical activities, such as exercise. A study found that university students who were engaged in aerobic exercise two days a week reported less perceived stress as well as significant improvement in self-reported depression. Diet can also affect one's mental health. Making sure to eat a well-balanced and nutritious diet, such as fresh foods, vegetables, and

fruits, can improve mental health, therefore making individuals less prone to stress. (Kubala, 2022) This includes a reduction or minimization in alcohol or caffeine intake. (Cleveland Clinic, 2020) Another method to deal with stress is to try and connect with others. This could be done by encouraging club or social group activities. Time-management and following a set schedule can help to reduce stress by efficiently managing one's work-life balance. (Harvard Health Publishing, 2020) This can also create a clearer picture of one's life, making it easier to get back on track. Practicing self-awareness can also help. Self-awareness is the ability to look at one's life objectively. It is helpful when dealing with stress as it requires individuals to take a step back to look at their life from a third-party viewpoint, making it easier to notice mistakes or solutions as compared to when they are occupied with emotions or the situation only in front of them. (Endara, 2020) According to the American Institute of Stress, a clear identification of personal triggers or stressors is essential to effectively plan one's stress management methods. (The American Institute of Stress, 2022) In a 2007 survey from APA, healthy reported stress coping strategies include listening to music (54%), reading (52%), exercising (50%), spending time with family and friends (40%), and praying (34%). (Bethune, 2007) In another study The Next Normal: Rise of Resilience with approximately 1000 Chinese respondents, results show that the most common method of stress relief is listening to music and spending time with family and friends, both at 55%, followed by taking naps and exercising, both at 40%. (Bloore, 2017)

Conclusion

Stress occurs when one experiences physical or mental tension. The psychological stress caused by societal changes from COVID-19 negatively affects many domains of lives, namely work and education, relationships, and physical and mental health, resulting in reduced overall life satisfaction. For adolescents, the education domain in life is most affected by these changes which include the changed learning style from onsite learning to online and hybrid learning during the pandemic. Accordingly, the need to change one's lifestyle results in stress which may lead to several negative consequences such as reduced belongingness and cognitive skills, as well as behavioral disengagement and self-blame.

The great impact these changes have on the education domain in life is lessened life satisfaction, so in hope to increase people's life satisfaction, supportive methods should be implemented as possible solutions along with preventative measures against COVID-19 since the pandemic is not completely over. Possible stress management strategies include encouraging people to engage in social activities, participate in physical activities, and focus on self-development. This review found that in-depth studies in some topics should be taken into consideration. Topics that can be further researched include similarities between stress from COVID-19 and normal stress, comparisons between mental and behavioral consequences of both types of stress, effects of changes in societal norms on people's overall life satisfaction, and the effectiveness of implemented supportive methods during the pandemic.

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