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Impact of COVID-19 on mental health of adolescents: A theoretical perspective

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Abstract

This theoretical paper examines the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of adolescents. The pandemic has brought about unprecedented changes in daily life and led to increased levels of anxiety and depression among adolescents. The paper explores potential long-term effects, including social anxiety, avoidant personality traits, PTSD, and other trauma-related disorders. Strategies for prevention and treatment of mental health problems during and after the pandemic are discussed, including community-based approaches and mental health education programs. The paper draws on studies by Loades *et al.* (2020), Xiong *et al.* (2020), Patrick *et al.* (2021), and Lee *et al.* (2020) to provide insights into the impact of the pandemic on adolescent mental health.

Keywords: COVID-19, adolescent, mental health, prevention, treatment

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on individuals and communities worldwide, affecting all aspects of life, including mental health. Adolescents, in particular, have been identified as a vulnerable population that may experience significant psychological distress during and after the pandemic. The unprecedented circumstances, including social distancing measures, school closures, and economic challenges, may contribute to increased stress, anxiety, and depression among adolescents. Moreover, the pandemic's impact on social connections, including limitations on in-person interactions, may exacerbate feelings of isolation and loneliness, further affecting mental health. Given the potential long-term consequences of adolescent mental health problems, it is essential to understand the unique challenges posed by COVID-19 and develop strategies to support adolescents' mental well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant impact on global health, economy, and social life.

Adolescents, who are at a crucial stage of development, have been greatly affected by the pandemic. The pandemic has disrupted their education, social life, and daily routines. These disruptions have caused an increase in mental health problems among adolescents the literature review provides an overview of existing research on the impact of COVID-19 on adolescent mental health, identifying potential risk and protective factors and discussing potential prevention and treatment strategies. Study by Racine *et al.* (2020) ^[9] found that the pandemic has caused an increase in suicidal ideation among adolescents. The study found that adolescents who had a history of mental health problems were at a higher risk of developing suicidal ideation during the pandemic.

Contributing factors

Several factors have contributed to the increase in mental health problems among adolescents during the pandemic. A study by Wang *et al.* (2020) ^[13] found that social isolation, fear of infection, and disrupted routines were the main contributors to mental health problems among adolescents. The study also found that adolescents who had access to social support and had stable family relationships experienced fewer mental health problems during the pandemic. One significant risk factor for adolescent mental health during the pandemic is increased stress and anxiety. The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, including concerns about infection, economic impacts, and changes in daily routines, can contribute to feelings

of stress and anxiety, which may manifest as physical symptoms such as headaches or gastrointestinal issues (Loades *et al.*, 2020) ^[7]. Additionally, social isolation and loneliness resulting from social distancing measures may exacerbate feelings of anxiety and contribute to poor mental health outcomes (Wang *et al.*, 2020) ^[13].

Other factors that may impact adolescent mental health during the pandemic include disrupted social connections and changes in daily routines. School closures and limitations on in-person interactions may result in reduced opportunities for social support and increased feelings of loneliness and isolation (Hawes *et al.*, 2021) ^[3]. Moreover, changes in daily routines, including disrupted sleep patterns and reduced physical activity, may also impact adolescent mental health (Loades *et al.*, 2020) ^[7].

On the other hand, several protective factors may support adolescent mental health during and after the pandemic. Strong family relationships and social support networks have been identified as protective factors that may buffer the impact of stress and anxiety (Hawes *et al.*, 2021) ^[3]. Additionally, maintaining daily routines, including regular exercise and sleep schedules, may also support adolescent mental well-being during this challenging time (Loades *et al.*, 2020) ^[7].

In summary, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent mental health is influenced by a range of factors, including increased stress and anxiety, disrupted social connections, and changes in daily routines. However, protective factors, including strong family relationships and social support networks, may support adolescent mental well-being during this challenging time.

Objectives

The main objectives of the paper were to explore potential long-term effects, including social anxiety, avoidant personality traits, PTSD, and other trauma-related disorders and to find out the strategies for prevention and treatment of mental health problems during and after the pandemic including community-based approaches and mental health education programs.

Methods

A systematic literature search was conducted using electronic databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, and Web of Science. The search terms used were "COVID-19", "coronavirus", "pandemic", "mental health", "adolescents", and "youth". The inclusion criteria were studies published in English between January 2020 and March 2023 that investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of adolescents.

Results

The literature search yielded a total of 46 relevant articles, including cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, qualitative research, and reviews. The majority of the studies reported a significant increase in mental health problems among adolescents during the pandemic, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation. The risk factors identified for poor mental health outcomes included social isolation, school closures, family conflict, financial hardship, and exposure to the virus. The studies also provide the empirical and theoretical data and strategies for prevention and treating mental health problems among adolescents during and after

the pandemic. Some important strategies for prevention and treatment are given below:

Strategies for Prevention and Treatment

There are several strategies for preventing and treating mental health problems among adolescents during and after the pandemic. Community-based approaches may be particularly effective, as they can provide support to adolescents who may be experiencing increased levels of stress and anxiety. Mental health education programs may be particularly effective in preventing the development of mental health problems among adolescents during the pandemic. These programs can teach adolescents coping strategies for managing stress and anxiety and provide them with the tools to maintain good mental health during a crisis. Community support groups can provide adolescents with a safe space to discuss their feelings and concerns and provide them with a sense of good mental health.

Prevention Strategies

Promoting Resilience: Resilience can be promoted through various activities such as physical exercise, social support, and engagement in creative activities. A study conducted by Masten *et al.* (2020) ^[16] found that promoting resilience among adolescents can help mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic on their mental health.

Providing Information: Adolescents need accurate information about the pandemic to reduce their anxiety and fear. Providing information through credible sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) can help reduce the risk of misinformation and promote mental wellbeing.

Social Support: Social support from peers, parents, and other caregivers can help reduce the negative effects of the pandemic on adolescent mental health. A study by Wang *et al.* (2020) ^[13] found that social support was positively associated with mental health outcomes among Chinese adolescents during the pandemic.

Online Therapy: Online therapy has become an essential tool for the prevention and treatment of mental health problems among adolescents during the pandemic. A study by Waite *et al.* (2020) ^[12] found that online therapy was effective in treating depression among adolescents during the pandemic.

Treatment Strategies

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT): CBT has been found to be an effective treatment for depression and anxiety among adolescents. A study by Zhou *et al.* (2020) ^[15] found that CBT was effective in treating depression among Chinese adolescents during the pandemic.

Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Mindfulness-based interventions have been found to be effective in reducing anxiety and depression among adolescents. A study by Schleider *et al.* (2020) ^[11] found that mindfulness-based interventions were effective in reducing anxiety and depression among adolescents during the pandemic.

Medication: Medication can be used to treat severe mental health problems among adolescents. However, medication

should only be prescribed by a qualified mental health professional and should be used in conjunction with other therapies.

Family Therapy: Family therapy can be an effective treatment for mental health problems among adolescents. A study by Gershkovich *et al.* (2020) ^[2] found that family therapy was effective in treating depression among adolescents during the pandemic.

Prevention and treatment strategies such as telemedicine and promoting healthy behaviors can be effective in addressing mental health problems among adolescents during and after the pandemic. It is essential to prioritize the mental health of adolescents and provide them with the necessary support to cope with the impact of the pandemic on their lives. Community-based approaches, such as mental health education programs and community support groups, may be effective in providing support to adolescents in need (Patrick *et al.*, 2021) ^[8].

Discussion and Implication of research

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on the mental health of adolescents, and it is important to consider these impacts from a theoretical perspective. This discussion will explore the theoretical implications of the pandemic on adolescent mental health and potential avenues for future research.

One theoretical framework that may be useful in understanding the impact of the pandemic on adolescent mental health is the stress and coping model. This model proposes that stressors, such as those caused by the pandemic, can lead to negative psychological outcomes if individuals lack effective coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) ^[4]. This framework highlights the importance of identifying effective coping strategies to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on adolescent mental health.

Another relevant theoretical framework is the social-ecological model, which proposes that individual mental health is influenced by multiple levels of social and environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) ^[1]. Applying this framework to the pandemic, it becomes clear that the impacts of the pandemic on adolescent mental health are shaped not only by individual-level factors, but also by social and environmental factors such as school closures, social isolation, and changes in daily routines.

In terms of future research, it will be important to continue exploring the impact of the pandemic on adolescent mental health and identifying effective interventions to support adolescent mental well-being. Additionally, further research is needed to explore the differential impacts of the pandemic on various subgroups of adolescents, such as those from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on adolescent mental health, and it is important to consider these impacts from a theoretical perspective. The stress and coping model and the social-ecological model are two theoretical frameworks that may be useful in understanding the impact of the pandemic on adolescent mental health. Future research should continue to explore the impact of the pandemic on adolescent mental health and identify effective interventions to support adolescent well-being.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant increase in mental health problems among adolescents. The findings of this literature review emphasize the need for ongoing research, early identification, prevention, and treatment strategies to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on adolescent mental health. This review serves as a call to action for policymakers, healthcare providers, and researchers to prioritize the mental health needs of adolescents during and after the pandemic.

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