Scientific insights into young peoples’ anxiety today

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Young people and the pandemic

» The COVID-19 pandemic particularly affected young people (Danese & Smith, 2022)

» There are several risk factors related to person, family and society
Individual risk factors

- **Perception of threat**, such as the infection and its dramatic health consequences
- Negative consequences of **school closure** – from social isolation to disruption of routine and lack of structure
- **Uncertainty** about the future, loss of educational and economic **ressources**, and malnutrition for the most disadvantaged
- Reduced levels of enjoyable **activities** and physical activity, loss of social contacts, **loneliness**
- Direct effects of the **infection** on the brain.
Family and disaster related stressors

Family Stressors

» Parental mental illness,
» Family financial stressors,
» Child abuse/neglect,
» Complicated/traumatic bereavement

Disaster related breakdown of protective structures

» Young people have been left without important external infrastructures that are normally in place to ensure their safety and provide support (Danese et al., 2020). Especially the impact of school closure was proven to be devastating.

» Breakdown of social services; although the need was rising they had to reduce activity because of the social distancing measures imposed through the lockdown. Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) had similar trends and now have even longer waiting lists than before lockdown.
Effects on young people

» Young people worry about the persistent threat and uncertainty; they become fearful, clingy, jumpy or very irritable (or, in contrast, they may become detached or numb)

» They develop headache and stomach ache related to the intense distress (Danese et al., 2020)

» During lockdowns they developed problems with sleep, eating behavior and lack of movement
Rising levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms

A cross-sectional survey of 1,784 primary school children (77% of the 2,330 surveyed) from Wuhan and Huangshi after 30 days of home confinement showed that the rates of high depressive and anxiety symptoms were elevated compared to previous surveys of primary school students in China (a 30% increase in depressive symptoms; Xie et al., 2020).

A cross-sectional survey of 8,079 junior and senior high school students from 21 provinces and autonomous regions again showed elevated rates of high depressive and anxiety symptoms (Zhou et al., 2020).

Our data showed the same pattern in Austria (Kulcar & Juen, 2020)
Not every child/adolescent is affected in the same way

» Remarkable resilience of many young people in the face of adversity (Rutter, 2013)
» Need to identify the determinants of individual differences in risk
» Pre-existing psychosocial vulnerabilities (e.g. child victimisation, social-economic disadvantage, history of psychopathology and caregiver mental health) play an important role
Inequalities in risk

» Lewis et al. (2019) showed inequalities in risk across the population

• Paradoxical effects: while school is a positive and nurturing environment for the majority of young people, those who were affected by bullying or intense academic pressure might have fared better during the lockdown
Overview
(Cielo et al., 2021)

» Increase of anxiety, stress, depression, event-specific distress, decrease in psychological wellbeing, and changes in sleeping, moving and eating habits

» Psychological symptoms were related to the experience of several stressors, such as risk for reduced academic perspectives, massive e-learning adoption, economic issues, social restrictions, and implications for daily life related to the COVID-19 outbreak
More studies to read

» Many more studies have been published, for example *Welcome Trust-funded catalogue of empirical research COVID-Minds* ([https://www.covidminds.org/longitudinal-studies](https://www.covidminds.org/longitudinal-studies)), Co-SPACE Study, ARC Study and RAMP Study
Emotions in young people regarding climate change and Covid (Kulcar, Siller & Juen, 2021)
Change of emotions over time

Graph showing the change of emotions over time for COVID-19 and Climate Change. The x-axis represents different time points (T0, T1, T2, T3) and the y-axis represents the percentage of individuals experiencing different emotions (depressed, hopeless, helpless, anxious, sad, angry). The graph is divided into two sections: COVID-19 on the left and Climate Change on the right.
Emotions and wellbeing

» Activating emotions like concern and worry did not have mental health impacts and were associated with increased mitigation efforts which imply adaptive reactions to the COVID-19 crisis.

» Concern, worry, and anxiety appeared to represent an adaptive response to climate change as well, as these emotions were associated with increased mitigation efforts.

» In contrast, the inactivating emotions of hopelessness, powerlessness, and helplessness were associated with decreased wellbeing.

» Hopelessness has been suggested to obstruct emotion regulation (and to contribute to depression).

» Therefore, motivating action against crises to support hope and a positive perspective might be one pathway of protecting mental health while mitigating the crises.
What, can we do to minimise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young peoples’ mental health?

» Policy measures that promote social justice and equity as well as investment in schools and social services can buffer the effects of the risk factors discussed above (Morgan & Rose, 2020).

» Staff and volunteers working with young people have important roles to play as advocates for young people.

» Provide more targeted support to young people who develop psychiatric disorders. Chronic underfunding has decimated CAMHS and needs to be urgently addressed to enable the services to cope with rising demand (The Lancet, 2020).

» Promote mental well-being in the population; universal psycho-educational interventions for young people and parents can also be implemented (e.g. (https://maudsleycharity.org/familiesunderpressure/; https://pscentre.org/?resource=psychological-first-aid-for-young-peers-a-handbook&selected=single-resource)
Participation

Adolescents, in particular, are at greatest risk of emotional disorders but progressively separate from their parents and strive to gain agency through individuation processes. Therefore, it is important to involve adolescents in coproduction of the materials targeted to them and find effective ways to engage their developing interests and preferences.

Young people have to be involved in decisions and actions that help to reduce threats and manage effects of climate change and other critical developments (One Health approach).
Apply the elements of Community Engagement (UNICEF 2020)

» Participation
» Empowerment and Ownership
» Inclusion
» Two-way Communication
» Adaptability and Localization
» Building on Local Capacity
The voice of young people

» We collected answers from adolescents, one example

» „Do not talk about young people, talk WITH young people, we need equal and just distribution of wealth/chances and true forms of participation“
References


References


