

Risk Factors Associated with Depressive Symptoms Among High School Students in China

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Abstract. Addressing the problem related to increasing rate of depression and high suicide rates among teenagers in China, the aim of this research is to examine the potential risk factors associated with depressive symptoms among Chinese high school students that is a special age group within China's population. The goal is to let more people realize this problem and better for schools and communities to come up with suitable or appropriate solutions for it. This can benefit the high school students' group as a whole. In this research, qualitative research method was being used. By doing a detailed literature review, I specifically put all the results into three category that are representative and determined three risk factors which include academic pressure, family relationship problems and lack of social supports.

Keywords: Psychology, Chinese high school students, depressive symptoms, academic pressure, family relationships, social supports.

1. Introduction

In nowadays society, the prevalence of high school students in China having depressive symptoms is clearly shown in several studies and research. According to a systematic review published by Xinfeng Tang (2019): "Studies have shown that as age increases, the prevalence of depressive symptoms among Chinese secondary school students also increases drastically, from 24.5% in the seventh grade to 40.1% in the twelfth grade." Rusen Chen (2018) also published a journal *The Lancet* and stated that in a cross-sectional study, 338 of 12470 adolescents reported that they had attempted suicide at least once in the past year. Since this phenomenon is so common throughout China these days, it is necessary to figure out what are some risk factors that are causing depressive symptoms among high school students. In this research paper, I specifically identified three major factors including academic pressure, poor family relationships and lack of social supports.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Risk Factors

2.1.1 Academic Pressure

With all the academic pressure suffered by Chinese high school students, the most worth-mentioned factor that cause the pressure is the College Entrance Examinations (CEE). According to a research report written in the *Journal of Asian Public Policy* by Wang Li, who is a professor in the Centre for East Asian Studies at The University of Bristol: "The CEE is a set of nationwide joint examinations taken by high school graduates in China. It employs five exams for the selected subjects and normally lasts for three days" (Wang Li, 2008). Based on the report it can be clearly known that: "Results of the examination are the key determinant of access to higher education. If students can get good results in the CEE, they would get a chance to study at the top universities in China. In contrast, if they fail to pass the examination, it would be very difficult for them to attend universities no matter how well they have done in their school " (Wang Li, 2008). CEE is a very cruel and difficult exam for high school students, they spent four years of studying just for this. Just as what the same reports said: "Access to tertiary education is important and meaningful for many Chinese students and their families because going to universities can get more respect from others and bring higher social status"

(Wang Li, 2008). And that's the reason why most high school students in China have an incredible amount of pressure on their academic aspect. According to the State Council Information Office: "Nearly 13 million young adults entered exam rooms across China on Wednesday morning to sit for the college entrance test, or "gaokao," a record high number since matriculation resumed in 1977" (Xinhua, 2023). The exam was known to be extremely competitive due to the large amount of people attending it each year. In a cross-sectional study conducted by Lan Guo, who is a professor from the Department of Medical statistics and Epidemiology at Sun Yat-sen University and published on PubMed, it has been clearly stated that academic pressure is an important type of stress factor leading to sleep deprivation and there are also studies that show the relationship between stress and sleep disturbance (Lan Guo, 2014). Therefore, we could infer that Chinese high school students are facing sleep deprivation due to the heavy academic stress. In the same study, researchers have also found that sleep disturbance was very common among Chinese adolescents, with a prevalence of 39.6%. Similar studies have reported that the prevalence of sleep disturbance in children and adolescents ranges from 66% to 90% (Lan Guo, 2014). Moreover, this study also found out that: "Adolescents who had depressive symptoms were at a higher risk for sleep disturbance" (Lan Guo, 2014). Zhiwei Xu (2011) who is from the Department of Epidemiology and Health Statistics at Anhui Medical University reported in a conducted study which he has detected an association between sleep disturbance and depressive symptoms among Chinese adolescents. And found that sleep disturbance was common among adolescents in China, and an adolescent's family, school and psychosocial factors have influences on sleep disturbance (Zhiwei Xu, 2011). Moreover, high academic pressure also led to lack of physical activities among high school students in China. According to an article written by Xihe Zhu and published on *Frontiers in Psychology*: "Academic stress, and associated constructs such as academic burden and academic pressure, can play a significant role in reducing the likelihood of adolescents in China engaging in adequate health-related behaviors such as physical activity" (Xihe Zhu, 2021). High load of work in school prevents students from going outside. There are several research also suggested that lack of physical exercise cause people to have depressive symptoms or eventually lead to depression and anxiety. Just like the evidence found by a research article published on Springer which stated that there is an association between physical activity and depressive symptom. On the other hand, this study also concluded that: "An increase in physical activity of about 1 h a week was associated with an 8% decrease in the odds of depressive symptoms in both boys and girls" (Catherine Rethon, 2010). An article from National Institutes of Health also suggested that physical activity affects people's mood, and that lack of physical activity will result in depressed mood (National Institutes of Health, 2019).

2.1.2. Family Relationship Problem

In addition to academic pressure, family relationship problem is another major factor causing depressive symptom among high school students in China. Family relationship include parent-children and inter-parental conflicts. According to a cross-sectional study conducted and published by Zheng Ren (2019): "Family is the most stable source of support throughout adolescence. A growing body of evidence highlights the important role of families in the prevention of internalizing problems in children and adolescents, of which depressive symptoms are the most frequently reported to be associated with family relationships among adolescents" (Zhang Ren, 2019). In the same article it has been stated that a poor parent-child relationship will increase the risk of depressive symptoms among adolescents and that there is also evidence showing that the prevalence of depressive symptoms increased from 13% and 11.4% among adolescents with good parental and parent-child relationships to 29.6% and 31.1% among those with poor parental relationships and parent-child relationships, respectively" (Zhang Ren, 2019). We can also conclude from this study which poor quality relationships with parents will result in more depressive symptom because children will be failing to gain emotional supports from their parents when needed (Zhang Ren, 2019). More than that, for interparental problems, it has also been mentioned that: "The family systems theory considers that family, as a basic emotional unit, has influence over maintaining the homeostasis of the system. The system may be easy to disrupt if parents have conflicts with each other" (Zhang Ren, 2019). Therefore,

we can infer that conflicts between parents which can be called as interparental conflicts are an important factor to stabilize adolescent's emotions. And that without a healthy interparental relationship, such as parental divorce, will have negative effects on the development of adolescents and it is an important risk factor for depressive symptoms in adolescents. On the other hand, Yap et al. (2014) identified a group of parental factors (e.g., inter-parental conflict, over-involvement, low level of parental warmth) that had a sound evidence base for adolescent depression (Yap et al, 2014). Studies have also shown that poor parent–child relationships (Hu and Ai, 2016; Yu et al., 2017a), and low-quality parent–child communication (Wu and Zheng, 2007; Xu et al., 2016) were related to elevated depressive symptoms in Chinese adolescents.

2.1.3. Lack of Social Supports

The last factor that was being identified is lack of social supports. Social supports, according to APA Dictionary of Psychology, can be defined as the provision of assistance or comfort to others, typically to help them cope with biological, psychological, and social stressors. Support may arise from any interpersonal relationship in an individual's social network, involving family members, friends, neighbors, religious institutions, colleagues, caregivers, or support groups(American Psychological Association, 2018). Major sources of social support for adolescents include family, peers, and schoolteachers (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). Among high school students in China, since they were consistently under high pressure, suitable and proper social supports from peers, parents and teachers are necessary for a stable mental health situation. In a conducted study about the relationship between social support and depression among Chinese adolescents, the social supports that Chinese middle and secondary school students received has been measured by the Child and Adolescents Social Supports Scale (CASSS). This scale includes three subscales: parent social support, tea- cher social support, and peer social support. The items were all rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never to 5 = always). And that specifically, according to the study: “Peer social support includes six questions to assess whether or not respondents perceived their peers as caring, friendly, and supportive. Teacher social support comprises five items on how often students' teachers show care, patience, and fairness to them. Parental social support contains four items measuring how often parents offer advice and help them address problems” (Cheng-Wen Chang, 2018). From the study results, it can be clearly tell that, the overall social supports that middle school and secondary school students reported that all within the scale about 3.2 to 3.4 with no one reported higher than this range. And that when it comes to high school students, the range is about 3.18 to 3.28 for the three kinds of social supports. This is even lower than the results reported by middle school students within the same study. Therefore, we can conclude that Chinese high school students these days receive very fewer social supports from people around them including parents, peers and teachers. There are many other issues connecting with lack of social supports within Chinese high school. Such as a journal on school-based counseling in mainland China stated that: “Only 34.8% of schools had SPs who were certified as mental health counselors or who had degrees in psychology and 19.6% of schools did not have any SPs. Based on teachers' reports, SPs' role mainly focused on services for students (e.g., teaching mental health lessons, counseling and consultation), with a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention” (Wang et al., 2015). From this we can see that, within Chinese high school, mental supports provided by professional counselors are very rare and scarce even within these years. With this in our mind, as a high school student in China, there are evidence showing that lack of social supports can directly lead to high risk of getting depression. According to the social support main effect model, a major psychosocial theory for explaining why people suffer from mental health problems, people who perceive that they have less social support are more likely to suffer from depression (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In addition, in the Journal of Affective Disorders, it has been stated that external assets refer to the opportunities and support that are provided by the surrounding environment such as family (e.g., parental SES and family functioning) (Benson et al., 2011). The more assets adolescents obtained, the less likely they are to experience mental health problems (e.g., depression) and the more likely to develop positively (high level of self-esteem and resilience) (Benson, 2002). The social causation model also assumes that social support is an antecedent of well-

being, and lack of social support causes psychological distress (Kaniasty and Norris, 2008). This model explains the social support-to-distress relationship and predicts that social support mitigates the likelihood of depression (Windle, 1992; Calsyn and Winter, 2002; Needham, 2008; Zhen et al., 2018). Beyond that, lack of social supports will also cause low self-esteem and self-efficacy among high school students. It can be clearly indicated in a review of the literature that social support enhances mental health through fostering of the individual's self-concept (Kim & Nesselroade, 2003). Two aspects of self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy, have mainly been discussed to explain the relationship between social support and the individual's mental health (Kim & Nesselroade, 2003; Saltzman & Holahan, 2002; Symister & Friend, 2003). First, social support promotes self-esteem by conveying messages of being cared for, being loved, and being valued by others and by fostering feelings of belonging (Kim & Nesselroade, 2003; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Turner, Turner, & Hale, 2014). In turn, this enhanced self-esteem can reduce the likelihood of suffering negative psychological outcomes, such as depression (Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Lee, Dickson, Conley, & Holmbeck, 2014). Second, social support can bolster self-efficacy by showing positive coping attitudes and skills, providing encouragement, and demonstrating that challenges can be overcome (Bandura, Schunk, & Hogan, 1981; Benight & Bandura, 2004). The resulting high self-efficacy can promote adjustment outcomes and psychological well-being (Bandura & Pallak, 1982). From this we can conclude that therefore, with lack of social supports, high school students will face the risk of having low self-esteem and self-efficacy. And by using the study conducted by Ching-Wen Chang, we can connect self-esteem, social supports, and depressive symptom. It has been concluded that among secondary school students, the level of depression is indirectly associated with social support through the mediating effect of self-esteem. (Cheng-Wen Chang, 2018).

3. Summary

To conclude, this research paper provides a very detailed determination of the three risk factors associated with depressive symptoms specifically among Chinese high school students. And that these three factors cause depressive symptoms in different ways by affecting different part of adolescent's mental health. All three of them including academic pressure, poor family relationship and lack of social supports can all be directly link to depression, some of them also have an indirect connection, such as for academic pressure, it initially affects student's sleep schedule, other than this, for lack of social supports, student's self-esteem was also negatively impacted by it. On the other hand, a general overview of the less than ideal situation China is facing when dealing with mental health problems especially with adolescents these years can also be clearly seen or predicted by this paper. Moreover, by knowing those risk factors, proper preventions such as therapists within schools and communities, are also important in protecting Chinese high students from getting depression or having depressive symptoms. And in some cases, if they already get found out having depressive symptoms, appropriate interventions and methods should be provided for them in order to prepare them with a healthy mental status when entering the society in the future.

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