

Effects of COVID-19 on Social Anxiety and Mitigation Strategies in Different Age Groups

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Abstract. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a noticeable rise in global social anxiety. The aim of this study is to examine and evaluate pertinent research from China and other countries to discern the effects of the pandemic on social fear in various age groups, particularly parents, adolescents, and children. Our review of the literature revealed that the psychological repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on social fear were diverse across different age brackets. The convergence of anxiety-provoking information on social media and the health risks contributed by COVID-19 intensify stress among parents. Furthermore, young individuals are constrained by school closures and limited opportunities for social interactions, aggravating the challenges to their social and mental well-being. To reduce social anxiety disorders, several strategies have been suggested, such as self-adjustment, parental help, and active involvement in social events. Implementing these tactics is predicted to enhance the exploration of social anxiety in various age brackets and advance psychological and social health recovery. This research emphasizes the significance of social and individual support initiatives during a pandemic to aid individuals in managing and conquering social anxieties, restoring social associations, and enhancing their overall quality of life.

Keywords: COVID-19; mental health; social anxiety; social anxiety disorder.

1. Introduction

Humans are social beings by nature, and social relationships and interactions play an important role in human civilization. In recent years, the rapid spread of COVID-19 and the introduction of social distancing measures have disrupted this delicate network of relationships. Throughout human history, social relationships have always been a fundamental part of everyday life. The lack of strong and significant relationships can cause nervousness and unease, highlighting the growing importance of mental health in contemporary society.

A review paper published in January 2023 by two academics, Glen W. Bates and Reuben Kindred, from Swinburne University of Technology, Australia, which explores the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on social anxiety. They conducted a systematic search of databases such as the Web of Science Core Collection, Embase, and PsychINFO through Endnote X9 and screened 33 studies to summarize them, concluding that social anxiety in the general population increased as a result of the epidemic, and that people suffering from social anxiety may be at risk for deteriorating mental health [1].

Social anxiety and social phobia are very common and important psychological problems because they have a significant impact on both the individual and wider society, making it particularly important to examine the role they play in the COVID-19 pandemic. As confirmed by a thorough analysis published in 2019, covering a period from 1980 to May 2018 - before the pandemic - the overall incidence of social phobia was 21% in a collection of 25 studies from 13 countries. This positions social phobia as the third most commonly reported psychiatric disorder [2]. During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, Philip Jefferies and Michael Ungar conducted an investigation into the occurrence of social anxiety among young people in seven different countries. The study's results revealed a globally increased incidence of social anxiety disorders, surpassing previous estimates. Notably, the criteria for diagnosing social anxiety disorder (SAD) were met by more than a third (36%) of the participants. While gender equality was observed in the occurrence and severity of social

anxiety symptoms, there were disparities in relation to age, location, job position, level of education, and urban versus rural dwelling.

Notably, a significant percentage (18%) of individuals who do not identify as having social anxiety still demonstrate symptoms that exceed or match the SAD threshold. These observations collectively highlight the relevance of social anxiety among global youth, often without their knowledge, emphasizing the necessity for increased awareness regarding the potential challenges they may face [3]. This paper will provide a review of literatures have done from China and around the world focusing on the impact of the epidemic on people of different age groups, specifically parents, adolescents, and children. Through this study, some strategies to alleviate social anxiety disorder are proposed, aiming to be able to better improve the phenomenon of social anxiety in people.

2. Case Description

Social anxiety and social phobia are two mental health difficulties that are often intertwined and can cause emotional and behavioral responses in social situations. Despite their similarities, they possess individual traits and consequences.

First, social anxiety is an emotional experience that involves constantly feeling afraid of negative judgment or evaluation from others during social interactions, it can be persistent and intense. Many people experience low self-worth, decreased self-esteem, and excessive concern about their appearance, speech, and behavior during social interactions. And social phobia is a psychological disorder. It usually starts early in life, with around 50% of individuals experiencing it before age 11 and about 80% before age 20 [4]. Similar to social anxiety, people with social phobia may avoid social situations, but their worry is more focused on their performance in these situations. They may experience physical symptoms such as a fast heartbeat, sweating, and trembling, or even encounter extreme fear [2].

Also, both social anxiety and social phobia could affect people's performance at work and school, making them hesitant to share opinions in social settings. This can disrupt personal growth, academic progress, and hinder relationship building with colleagues, teachers, and classmates, which causes increasing feelings of isolation, loneliness, and worsens anxiety. A paper posted in 2019 has discovered that people with psychiatric conditions often have social phobia [2]. Prolonged isolation, along with negative emotions and feelings of loneliness, can lead to depression, which creates a harmful cycle.

Issues like social anxiety and social phobia, which often receive insufficient recognition, has become increasingly pertinent in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak and the ensuing quarantine measures. Examining the pandemic's impact in China, it is apparent that people of varying ages - particularly parents, adolescents, and children - experienced notable increases in social anxiety. As a result of the epidemic-related blockade and quarantine, many parents have experienced job loss, increased financial strain and instability in family dynamics. These adversities may cause feelings of helplessness and anxiety among parents. They now need to take care of both them and their children to guarantee their health and well-being. In addition, amidst the epidemic, parents may have to juggle work, family, and schooling, compounding their stress and anxiety levels. Consequently, quarantined parents may have a heightened experience of social anxiety compared to non-quarantined counterparts.

Moreover, measures of segregation also have an impact on younger age groups such as adolescents and children, making them more susceptible to social anxiety. Adolescents and children often tend to socialize to foster friendships, develop social skills, and shape their identities. However, epidemic-related isolation has limited opportunities for adolescents to interact with their peers. Many adolescents experience isolation and disconnection from their social environment. The lack of in-person social engagement may have contributed to a decline in social skills and an increased risk of social anxiety. At the same time, school closures and the adoption of online learning could also lead to adolescents not having normal school social interactions, worsening their social anxiety.

3. Analysis of Problems

3.1. Parents Who Undergo Quarantine Are at an Increased Risk of Developing Social Anxiety Disorder

The pandemic has had widespread and profound effects on social anxiety in adults and children. Parents reported more significant social anxiety during the quarantine period than non-quarantined parents. A research paper from 2021 compared the effects of coronavirus-related isolation on parents. The research utilized information gathered during the COVID-19 Social Perception and Behavior Survey conducted within Hubei Province, China, the first province in China where the novel coronavirus was detected, spanning from January 31 to February 8, 2020[5]. The study randomly selected 11 schools in Hubei Province under the premise of school consent for investigation. The survey encompassed the involvement of 2393 parents throughout the research. The research examined the correlation between parental isolation and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) occurrence using a sequence of ordinary least squares regression analyses in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. The results showed that the generalized anxiety disorder symptoms of parents who had undergone social isolation in Wuhan exhibited notably elevated symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder compared to their counterparts in Wuhan who had not experienced social isolation [6]. There is reason to believe that parents in Wuhan will feel anxious because Wuhan, as the city where the new crown virus originated in China, residents have more first-hand information about the epidemic. Parents will worry about the health of their children and their parents. The dual pressure of parents and children will increase the psychological burden on parents. A consistent pattern has emerged in recent research, showing a strong link between adverse health consequences and risky behaviors with social media usage, particularly when individuals are exposed to misinformation and conspiracy theories during disease outbreaks. [7]. This study also has certain limitations. The experiment used epidemic data collected online, and all participants participated in the survey in the form of self-report. So, online surveys may yield biased news [6].

3.2. Teenagers Experience Increased Social Anxiety During the Pandemic

Adolescent social anxiety is also affected during the pandemic. The psychological repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic are considerably more profound on adolescents than adults, as stress makes them more likely to be negatively affected [8]. In a 2020 publication, an analysis is conducted to assess the psychological effects of COVID-19 on adolescents in China. This article uses a structured questionnaire cross-sectional online survey to collect demographic information related to the epidemic from April 7 to 24, 2020. The study comprised 493 junior high school students and 532 high school students as the statistical sample. The findings indicated that over 20% of both junior and senior high school students experienced an impact on their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic in China [9]. The article suggests that employing positive coping mechanisms protects against depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms in junior and high school students. Conversely, negative coping strategies pose a risk for the development of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms [9]. Positive coping approaches have the potential to improve mental well-being by granting individuals greater control over chaotic situations and fostering the formation of fulfilling relationships within their support networks [10, 11]. The adoption of positive coping strategies can also facilitate academic adjustment among college students and reduce instances of maladaptive behavior [11]. Negative coping encompasses actions like concealing emotions, avoiding the situation, and withdrawing from others [9]. In the context of COVID-19, the surge in academic pressure caused by the closure of many schools and the fear of getting sick caused by the increase in virus infections are all stressors for adolescents to negative coping. Overuse of negative coping strategies often hinders adaptation and mental health [11, 12]. Therefore, positive coping can improve the mental health of students. Young people should use more positive coping during the pandemic to avoid social anxiety.

3.3. Online Information Increases Social Anxiety in Children

The epidemic will not only have a psychological impact on parents and teenagers, but children's social anxiety cannot be ignored. The lives of today's children have become inseparable from the media. A wealth of literature highlights the diverse issues that may arise due to excessive digital media exposure, and these challenges are unique to each age bracket, ranging from infants to adolescents [13]. Now that the epidemic is happening in a highly digital age, many children are forced to obtain education, chat, and information online. In a 2022 publication, an examination was conducted to assess the influence of screen time (ST) on the psychological well-being of children amid the pandemic. Research has indicated that increased levels of ST seem to correlate with heightened anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms, largely attributed to exposure to negatively portrayed news and information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic [14]. COVID-19-related content shared on social media has the potential to inundate individuals, and emotional posts linked to COVID-19 can contribute to heightened levels of anxiety and depression [15].

4. Suggestions

4.1. Parents Coping with Their Own Anxiety

Measures must be taken to address the worsening of social anxiety in people of all ages within the context of the pandemic. Parents' primary focus should be self-adaptation to aid their children better. This self-adaptation process includes regular exercise, maintaining a balanced diet, and establishing consistent sleep patterns to promote overall health. Secondly, individuals should limit their exposure to COVID-19-related media coverage to prevent excessive emotional anxiety and panic, and engaging in personal hobbies can assist in rebuilding a sense of normalcy. Parents can actively seek out and build support networks to share experiences and emotions with other parents. By sharing problems, parents can gain greater control over their situation, ultimately minimizing anxiety [16].

4.2. Parental Assistance

In addition, parents should receive education about treating and preventing anxiety disorders in children. It is crucial to establish open and honest communication with children, encouraging them to express their feelings and concerns. Planning for uncertainty and stress and implementing it with children can increase their sense of security [16]. Parents should prioritize maintaining a consistent bedtime schedule for their children. It is also important to closely monitor and discourage excessive and irresponsible use of social media or online gaming. Engaging in discussions with adolescents to establish limitations on their online activities is recommended. Additionally, promoting indoor activities and games that do not involve electronic devices is highly encouraged [17].

4.3. Active Participation in Social Activities

Adolescents and children face multiple sources of anxiety in the current situation, such as the closure of schools, feelings of isolation, reduced physical activity opportunities, adherence to social distancing measures, and constraints on their freedoms. During school closures, it is critical to maintain a consistent daily routine and provide ample opportunities for recreation, reading, rest, and physical activity [17]. According to a 2021 study in Canada, adolescents primarily use digital platforms like video calling, text messaging, collaborative video gaming, and social networking to maintain their social connections. The participants indicated that connecting online helped reduce stress and maintain social connections [18].

During stay-at-home orders, many individuals have dedicated more time to being with their families than previously. They participate in various shared activities like playing games and walking while following recommended physical distancing protocols. Additionally, some participants have mentioned that visiting friends or family outdoors has become a socially distant yet meaningful way

to connect with others. Despite changes in how people maintain contact with one another, the significance of interpersonal interactions during the pandemic has remained evident [18].

Many adolescents have emphasized the importance of getting fresh air, which includes incorporating exercise into their daily routines and practicing specific sports skills with family members [18]. Increasing "green time" (GT) has been shown to have a positive impact on mental health [19]. For children, GT may be filled with playtime and outdoor physical activities, effectively alleviating stress and contributing to their psychological well-being. Green time encompasses spending time in natural settings such as parks, forests, gardens, and playgrounds, which promotes outdoor physical activities and is also necessary for mental health [20].

Furthermore, participants have also noted that finding new activities and hobbies can keep them occupied and distract their minds from pandemic-induced social anxieties. These leisure activities include playing video games, cooking and baking, engaging in arts and crafts (such as handicrafts, music, and dance), reading, and watching TV or movies. All these recreational activities serve as constructive ways to cope with the social fears arising from the pandemic [18].

5. Conclusion

Through research, this article found that whether it is parents, youth, or children, the pandemic will aggravate their social anxiety. Therefore, this study makes people realize that the epidemic will cause physical harm and substantial psychological anxiety. People's neglect of psychological anxiety has led to social and economic problems. People may become irritable, exhausted, and distant, leading to conflicts with loved ones, friends, colleagues, and family. If people bring negative emotions to work, their job performance will decline, and the individual's financial stability will become unstable. Therefore, Measures are needed to protect and promote mental health to ensure society's stability. The current study also has some things that could be improved. First, in some studies, people participated in surveys in the form of self-reports. The information collected can produce biased results. Second, the distribution of the survey sample should be broader. The survey should collect more people of all ages in the country to analyze their social anxieties.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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