Adolescents' mental health; coping strategies, social support and interventions: a qualitative study in Switzerland

Abstract

Purpose: Adolescence is an important life stage including physical, emotional and social changes that make adolescents vulnerable to mental health issues. To face these emotional and behavioral problems, adolescents may use various coping strategies. This exploratory qualitative study aimed to better understand the coping strategies when adolescents face mental health difficulties, the reasons why some adolescents find it difficult to seek social support and/or professional care and which interventions they would find efficient to improve adolescents' mental health.

Methodology: Our study included 28 participants aged between 12-19 years old. Four online focus groups separated by gender and age were performed between March and April 2021, during the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland.

Findings: Our results show that several strategies put forward by participants did not include talking about their problems with others. Reducing the stigma and taking the adolescents' mental health seriously would make it easier for adolescents to talk about their problems to other people. Overall, participants considered that doing leisure-time activities and going out with friends were the best way to reduce stressful situations and mental health problems. For all aspects of health, including the mental one, it is important that policies promote the access to sports and arts activities for all the adolescents.

Originality: This study explored adolescents' coping strategies and their opinions on intervention for dealing with potential mental health problems, an issue that is still taboo for some adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescents; Coping strategies; Emotional Problems; Qualitative study; Mental Health; Youths.

Introduction

Adolescence is an important life stage including physical, emotional and social changes that make adolescents vulnerable to mental health issues (World Health Organization, 2021). To face these emotional and behavioral problems, adolescents may use various coping strategies. Some of them are non-productive, such as ignoring the problem or self-blaming, while others are productive, such as solving the problem or seeking social support (Lewis and Frydenberg, 2004).

Assistance and resources in an adolescent network have been recognized as an important protective factor for mental health (Bauer et al., 2021) and a way to cope after traumatic experiences (Orygen: The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, 2018). According to them, informal and formal support such as peers, parents and school staff may have positive outcomes on, for instance, emotional resilience, social skills, stress reduction and academic achievement. Furthermore, seeking professional help does not seem to be a frequent strategy used by adolescents when they experience mental health issues (Rowe et al., 2014, Gulliver et al., 2010). For instance, a systematic review on the reported barriers of help-seeking in adolescents and young people (Gulliver et al., 2010) found that only 18 to 34% of those with high levels of mental disorder symptoms seek professional help. Different reasons such as stigma, handling the problem alone or talking with friends could be put forward (Ebert et al., 2019).

Given the rising prevalence of mental health disorders among adolescents (Phillips and Yu, 2021, Mojtabai et al., 2016) and given the fact that this phenomenon seems to have amplified with the COVID-19 pandemic (Sprang and Silman, 2013), effective promoting and preventive measures must be identified. School, community, family and digital interventions may have positive effects

on adolescents' well-being (Das et al., 2016). To develop effective messages and campaigns, it is important to include the adolescents' voice (Barrense-Dias, 2019).

The aim of this exploratory study was to better understand the coping strategies when adolescents face mental health difficulties, the reasons why some adolescents find it difficult to seek social support and/or professional care and which interventions they would find efficient to improve adolescents' mental health.

Methods

This project was part of a multinational study supported by United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and coordinated by the John Hopkins Coordinating Centre of the Global Early Adolescent Study. This exploratory qualitative research aimed to explore the mental health of young people in their communities around the world through focus groups (FG). We conducted an exploratory qualitative research on mental health in the French-speaking region of Switzerland. This article focuses on the coping strategies of adolescents when they face mental health problems. Our study included 4 FGs separated by gender (female/male) performed between March and April 2021. A detailed description of the survey methodology can be found elsewhere[1].

Results

Based on the interview guide, three main themes emerged: coping strategies, social support and interventions strategies.

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[1] The reference has been removed to ensure that the manuscript is properly blinded.

Coping strategies

We were interested in the methods and mechanisms adolescents used to reduce stressful situations and uncomfortable emotions. Several strategies put forward by participants did not include talking about their problems with others. According to them, outward appearances could be deceiving and some people would manage to hide their malaise.

> *"I think you cannot necessarily guess, sometimes there are people who hide that. [...] A jovial person who changes her/his behaviour, we will concentrate on that and see, whereas if the person does not necessarily change her/his behaviour and hides it, I think that we will not necessarily notice it." (Female, 15).*

Some participants considered that doing extra-curricular activities helped taking their mind off their problems and distance themselves from them. In this line, regarding small or temporary concerns, engaging in leisure activities with friends, without necessarily talking about their concerns, would help some adolescents reduce negative mood.

> *"[...] For quite minor problems, [or] problems that upset us at the time but that we know will pass etc. [...] Making sure to spend a good time with people we love and just forget about them [problems] a bit [...] can also help to overcome a bit periods that are not very pleasant for the person emotionally." (Female, 15).*

Many adolescents pointed out the importance of having a passion to reduce the academic-related stress.

> *"I think it is really important to have a passion beside what you do, for example studies which can be very heavy for some people, [...]. I think that finding a passion or something that acts as an escape is super important [...]." (Female, 16).*

Other activities such as reading were considered by some participants as a good way to deal with stress.

> *"Occupations like [...] reading a book could maybe keep them busy for a while. Well, it is not going to keep them busy all the time, maybe the stress will come right back afterwards, but at least it kept them busy for a while, it took some of the stress off, maybe..." (Male, 15).*

Writing has also been suggested by a participant as a wellbeing activity. Indeed, it would be a way to externalise one's problems, without necessarily talking about them.

> *"[...] There are a lot of people who cope by writing [...] I see quite a few people with notebooks where they write down what they feel and so on, and they do not necessarily talk about it, but the fact of writing it down and seeing things in reality and not just keeping them within oneself, I think that it is a way that quite a few people use." (Female, 14).*

Social support

Three main themes emerged from the discussions with the adolescents. The difficulty of talking, gender stereotypes and whom to turn to were the main issues regarding social support.

Difficulty of talking

Some participants said that it was not always easy to talk about their problems, as they did not want to be a burden to others and cause concern.

> *"There is also the fact that you do not want to talk about it, you keep quiet because you do not want to worry others, you do not want to be a burden [...]." (Female, 19).*

Talking about mental health problems may be difficult for some adolescents because it involves intimacy.

> *"[...] These are our feelings, I would say, it is a private thing especially as we are young." (Male, 18).*

Several participants reported that they generally did not talk about their problems fearing that they would be minimised and categorised as just teenage problems and non-serious issues.

> *"[...] We are teenagers, we are taken less seriously, our problems would not be serious, so it is like we were acting." (Male, 17).*

Some male participants considered that talking about their problems was tantamount to showing their weaknesses. They preferred to keep their concerns to themselves worrying that what they shared could be used against them later.

> *"[...] If I show my weakness, I have the impression that I will be attacked afterwards. So it is a way of protecting myself." (Male, 16).*

Another participant replied :

> *"Yeah, sometimes showing your weaknesses is a bit like giving a stick and getting hit back." (Male, 17).*

Gender stereotypes

No consensus has been reached between the participants about the amount of problems faced by respectively females and males. However, according to some, the differences would be in the way emotions are expressed, with males hiding their struggles more due to the gender norms imposing males a form of pride.

> *"Maybe there is more pride in males [...] with the image that they have to hold on to some pride, being a man [...]." (Male, 15).*

In this line, it would be more difficult for males to say that they are not feeling well due to the construction of masculinity that imposes on them standards of strength.

> "[...] In our society, I have the impression that a man does not have the right to feel, so to speak. [...] At home I was told 'Yeah you are not allowed to cry, you are not allowed to feel that way, you have to be strong [...].' We are often told to stay strong and not show our weaknesses." (Male, 18).

Thus, most of the males said that they would try to solve their problems on their own before talking to someone else.

> "I think at the beginning, I would try more to [...] find solutions by myself, and then if I see that there is no solution, I would try to talk about it to relatives." (Male, 18).

According to some male participants, females would talk more about some problems that males may judge not relevant. However, they considered that these problems may have an impact later on.

> "They [females] [...] talk more about their small problems. [...] The small problems that we (males) feel that there is no need to talk about, and even those little problems have [...] an impact on you later on, I think." (Male, 15).

The consequences of these gender norms could therefore be harmful for males as they would not be able to confide and get help.

> "Girls talk about them [the problems] a lot in general, they have more opportunities to talk about them [...]. I think it is more dangerous for males to have mental problems than for females, because males cannot talk about them and... so they close themselves off, and they never talk about them, after a while it starts to eat away at them." (Male, 15).

Whom to turn to

When they decide to talk about their worries, the majority of participants reported it was usually to friends.

> *"If I see that I can solve the problem by myself, I will try to solve it. And if I have no choice but to rely on friends, then I will go to my friends." (Male, 17).*

When asked about whether it was easy to help a friend who presented certain mental health issues, some participants expressed a sense of helplessness in the face of other people's vulnerability.

> *"[...] It is complicated to help someone when we ourselves would not know what to do in our case, so apart from saying to a person that you can talk about it [...] and trying to be there for the person, there is not much we can do [...]." (Female, 15).*

One participant felt that it could be dangerous for oneself to help someone else fearing that he/she will then be affected by similar problems.

> *"It is also dangerous to be too supportive, to become a friend's psychologist or doctor, this can contaminate, so it is also always difficult to find the balance between friendly support and [...] when it [...] becomes a kind of dependency in the relationship." (Female, 19).*

However, some considered that it was easier and better to talk to friends compared to health professionals who were considered as unfamiliar.

> *"I think that young people go to friends rather than health professionals to talk about what is wrong and it is also quite difficult, I think, when there are mental health problems or whatever, to talk to someone you do not know [...]." (Female, 18).*

In relation to health professionals, one participant reported that someone who consults a psychologist could be stigmatized.

> *"[...] Going to see a psychologist is immediately considered as if you have a problem and that is very hard to accept [...]. I think there are people who are a bit afraid of that*

and so if they have problems, they just prefer to turn to their friends for advice, to avoid

making a big deal of it and feeling judged […].” (Female, 14).

Some participants reported that parents were a good resource to turn to, since they generally know their children well.

“(I would go to) my parents I think. Because I grew up with them, they know everything

about me, so I think the people I could trust the most are my parents [...].” (Female,

15).

However, other considered that there was a generational gap between them and their parents.

“I would say that going to the parents might not be the best thing to do, personally,

because I know that my parents have a different mentality [...], they do not understand

the young people of this generation, [...] they might be the first ones to judge me [...]

and they will not necessarily help me [...].” (Female, 15).

Finally, according to some adolescents, even if they know whom to turn to, the problem would be how to talk about mental health problems.

“They know whom to turn to […] but how to talk about them [their problems] this may

be a little vague to them.” (Male, 14).

Interventions

We asked the participants if they had ideas about interventions that could help adolescents maintain good mental health. Different ideas were brought up during the discussions, categorized in five subgroups: reform of the school system, collaborative values, digital resources, raising the taboo on mental health and prevention on the risks linked to social networks.

Reform of the school system

Among the possible interventions, reforming the school system has been suggested by some participants.

> *"[...] It is mainly a question of modernising the school system, because I think it is no longer up-to-date." (Male, 17).*

Overall, many participants considered that the school pressure represented a great source of stress and that there should be less pressure at the academic level.

> *"Efforts should be made to reduce all the pressure that is put on young people, on their studies [...]." (Female, 18).*

Regarding the school pressure, a participant considered that there should be a greater emphasis on a pupil's progression instead of focusing on his/her grades, and that he/she should be valued in this sense.

> *"If we were evaluated more on progress... [...] Maybe someone who is going to work and try harder and be more diligent will deserve more than someone who is easily successful in school and that should be more valued, I think." (Male, 17).*

Collaborative values

Several participants saw a need for adolescents to be more understanding and supportive of each other.

> *"To support each other I think, to try to understand each other instead of always judging each other, [...] just to give off less hate, to be more positive, I think that could help people to feel better about themselves [...]." (Female, 14).*

In this line, a participant considered that school was an appropriate place to educate youth about collaboration and support.

"[…] [A solution to reduce the pressure would be] that we learn a little bit about real things at school, not just concepts, grades […]. Collaborating with people, participating into youth engagement […], learning about who we really are [...]." (Female, 19).

Raising the taboo and removing the barriers

According to several participants, it would be important to give spaces to talk about mental health issues.

"[…] I think that we have difficulties with the mental health of young people, precisely because we do not talk about it enough, because people are afraid to talk about it. And maybe if we had more this awareness which allows to talk with people, to express ourselves more, without necessarily feeling judged and attacked, perhaps we would make more progress." (Male, 16).

In this line, they considered that adolescents' mental health should be taken more seriously.

"[…] The mental health of young people must be taken seriously […], it is not just about worries because we grow up, […] I think that always trivialising these worries is very harmful." (Female, 19).

A participant considered that adolescents should be offered free consultations with mental health professionals.

"[…] I think that if we provided mental support, for example by giving money to people who have difficulty to see a psychologist, […] it would have an influence." (Male, 18).

Digital resources

The online platforms dedicated to adolescent health are very helpful according to some participants. Moreover, the fact that people can remain anonymous would be appreciated by some adolescents. A participant considered that they should be more informed about these possibilities.

"[…] I know there are quite a few [websites] because in my school we talked a bit about that. Websites like ciao.ch, websites where you do not necessarily have to say your name, personal information, but you get advice […]. Informing them [adolescents] that there are websites and people dedicated to help them." (Female, 12).

More generally, some participants considered that social networks were the best medium to spread prevention messages to adolescents.

"I think that making a video, doing something that could be shared on social networks, because very few of us watch TV or pay attention to the posters we see on the streets […]." (Female, 14).

Regarding social networks, some adolescents considered that prevention of the risks linked to social networks, such as cyberbullying, should be reinforced.

"[…] I think that, in addition to reducing violence on social networks, we could also educate people about the dangers of social networks, much more. […] There are people who can harass, we are all potential harassers and potential victims and we should be taught what we risk as harassers and how to avoid being harassed." (Male, 17).

In relation to these resources, participants considered that using testimonies from people who had suffered from mental health problems would be a good way to help adolescents with mental health issues.

"[…] Perhaps we should have videos of people and their stories, and especially their step towards recovery, how they did to get better, and encourage people to... to get better." (Female, 15).

Discussion

This qualitative study presents the opinions of adolescents regarding potential coping strategies when they face mental health difficulties, the reasons why some of them find it difficult to seek

social support and/or professional healthcare and which interventions they would find efficient to help adolescents' mental health. Four main themes emerged with the analysis: coping strategies, difficulty of talking and raising the taboo, gender stereotypes and reform of the school system.

Overall, participants considered that doing leisure-time activities and going out with friends were the best way to reduce stressful situations and mental health problems. Previous research found that this type of activities contribute to the adolescents' well-being (Cosma et al., 2021). Furthermore, another study found an association between leisure activities in adolescence and lower odds of mental health disorders in adulthood (Timonen et al., 2021). For all aspects of health, including the mental one, it is important that policies promote the access to sports and arts activities for all the adolescents, regardless of their socio-economic status. Moreover, community-based interventions allow and facilitate the integration of more isolated adolescents into youth groups and improve well-being. Furthermore, some extra-curricular activities were no longer possible due to the measures imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is therefore important to pay attention to the impact that such restrictions may have had on adolescents' mental health.

As emphasized by a systematic review (Radez et al., 2021) on young people's barriers to seek and access help when facing mental health problems, the participants reported difficulties to talk about these issues. Increased levels of mental health literacy are needed to help young people to have a better understanding of the concept of mental health (Tissera and Tairi, 2020, Jorm, 2000). This would allow them to recognize mental health issues and talk about them, and thus, would facilitate help-seeking behaviors. Furthermore, such mental health literacy programs, carried out in particular through school-based interventions, would reduce mental health stigma, another barrier to help-seeking behaviors (Radez et al., 2021). Reducing the stigma and taking the adolescents'

mental health seriously would make it easier for adolescents to talk about their problems to other people and, more specifically, to mental health specialists without fear of judgement. It is also important to promote awareness among parents about adolescent mental health and to provide them with tools to identify mental health issues (Reardon et al., 2017). Finally, parents and adolescents should be provided with spaces for discussion on these issues.

It is important to note that talking about mental health problems would be even more difficult for males than females according to the participants. These considerations are in line with those from other studies (Chandra and Minkovitz, 2006, Staiger et al., 2020) that showed that the construction of masculinity requires males to hide their feelings and to be proud and strong, which would lead them to hide their difficulties more than females and to seek mental health services less frequently. Campaigns and actions are needed to deconstruct stereotypes and gender norms which could have an impact on males' mental health and their ability to talk about mental health problems from an early age.

The first strength of this study is to gather the opinions of adolescents on their coping strategies when they face mental health difficulties. Secondly, we explored social support from a global perspective and explored the reasons why some adolescents find it difficult to seek support not only from professional but also from peers and parents. Thirdly, we collected their opinions on the interventions they would find efficient to promote mental health. Finally, this exploratory study paves the way to research for more precise empirical data. However, some limitations need to be discussed. Firstly, since data are collected based on respondents' self-reports, there is a risk of self-censoring. However, we reduced it by asking general opinions and not personal problems and by

forming gender and age homogeneity groups. Secondly, the snowball process, one of our recruitment methods, could have the bias of gathering participants who share the same characteristics and opinions. Thirdly, the results of this study may not be fully generalizable due to the nature of the study, the small sample of participants and some of the issues may be related to the Swiss context.

Conclusion

Several recommendations stem from this study. Given the fact that many adolescents find it difficult to talk about their concerns and problems, it is important to raise the taboo on mental health issues. Providing them with spaces for discussion and digital resources would ease the exchanges on emotional and behavioural problems. This would also reduce the stigma that surrounds people who consult, or want to consult, a mental health specialist. Furthermore, gender norms are detrimental to adolescents' mental health and actions and campaigns aimed at deconstructing them are needed. Regarding school, it is important to think about the school system and measures that may help reduce the stress linked to it. Finally, the access to extra-curricular activities should be given to all the teenagers to promote the inclusion of more isolated adolescents.

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