

Depression & Anxiety in Critical Transitional Periods in an Adolescent's Life

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Abstract

Depression and anxiety during critical moments in an adolescent's life, such as entering and graduating high school, may be more prevalent than many individuals think. I examined adolescents and rated the amount of depression and anxiety they were experiencing, as well as what coping mechanisms were common among these adolescents and whether they were healthy or unhealthy.

The research involved going to local school districts around the Menomonie, Wisconsin area and evaluating previous surveys that the school districts have already administered. The surveys gathered by the school districts analyzed depression and anxiety in the students, and what coping mechanisms the students were using with a heavy concentration on substance abuse knowledge and use.

The purpose of this study is to find out how much depression and anxiety is affecting these students as well as what coping mechanisms they are using. We also investigated healthy resources students are using in their school district as well as in their own community. Furthermore, the purpose is to raise awareness to the school systems about how students are dealing with depression and anxiety and to help students identify the resources that are available to them.

Keywords: depression, anxiety, adolescent, coping skills

Introduction

Depression and anxiety during critical moments in an adolescent's life, such as entering high school (8th grade) and graduating high school (12th grade), may be more prevalent than many individuals think. Moving from middle school to high school can be a very challenging time in life and it can cause a lot of anxiety in youth. Some adolescents can handle this transition fairly well, while others have a more difficult time coping with the stressors that come along with this transition in their lives. Many adolescents may even start using negative coping mechanisms that people may label as "just being a kid". Some of these coping mechanisms could be things

like talking back, getting angry, yelling, or even more dangerous things like smoking cigarettes, using marijuana, or drinking alcohol. The same thing can be said of young adults in 12th grade. These individuals are overwhelmed thinking about their future and the added stressors in their life. Making sure these young adults already have an arsenal of healthy coping mechanisms is a key to their future success.

A major aspect of adolescence and young adulthood is learning how to self-regulate their emotions, cognition, and behavior. It is imperative during the adolescent and young adult years to learn self-regulation. Self-regulation has an impact on mental health, physical health, interpersonal communication and academic functioning (Wadsworth, Rieckmann & Compas, 2004). Part of self-regulation is coping with the stressors in these individual's lives and making sure to use healthy coping mechanisms. Another important aspect of dealing with stress is making sure that a person can identify what their stressors are and find a way to cope with what they find. Starting to learn these skills at a young age can help promote positive health all around. Another reason why this research is so significant is because adolescents are actually some of the most vulnerable individuals alive. Adolescents are not being screened for mental illnesses, being properly diagnosed, receiving referrals or proper treatment for their issues. Many adults view certain behaviors that adolescents and young adults have as "acting out" or that they are "going through a phase" and hope these behaviors pass. Because of this, a number of adolescents are not brought to a professional to get help until the behaviors have been neglected for a substantial period of time and have escalated from getting into trouble at school and in the community to being a threat to themselves and others. At this point the professionals are worried about working on the specific behaviors that are presenting themselves, and unfortunately the treatment outcome could be compromised because it is much more difficult to treat (Yearwood, 2012).

Many professionals are pushing towards prevention and early intervention instead of waiting until behaviors progress (Yearwood, 2012). According to Yearwood (2012), "...the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) developed a policy statement on competency guideline that strongly recommend that healthcare providers in primary care screen all children and adolescents for behavioral and psychiatric difficulties" (p. 51). The fact is that there is an inconsistency between the number of children who need mental health care and the low number that are actually being treated for mental health disorders by a specialist (Yearwood, 2012).

Finally, this research is necessary because of the implications that traumas and stressors can have on an adolescent or young adult's development. There is a variety of "stress-related chronic non-communicable diseases" such as cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes, arthritis, and neuropsychiatric diseases that can appear physically (Fric-

chione, 2014). These diseases occur over a long period of time and would not become evident until adulthood, but teaching youth how to cope and manage stress in a positive way could help prevent these incurable diseases. Fricchione (2014) also mentions that children are suffering from toxic stress after traumatic events which can then lead to chronic illness. Something that is also very important to keep in mind is that the timing of traumas is correlated to brain development. It is believed that the effects of stress early on in life are connected to an increased reaction to stressors and cognitive deficits in adulthood as well. The prefrontal cortex in an adolescent's brain is believed to be extremely vulnerable, and the prefrontal cortex is involved in an individual's response to stress, attention, organization, self-regulation, and planning. Traumatic events in an adolescent's life could possibly affect the individual's brain development, developmental skills, talents, personality development, and functioning. Knowing all of the psychological effects that trauma and stress could bring into a child's life makes screening for the presence of these and educating the public about the implications of trauma and stress very important. Also, disorders that were previously diagnosed as adult disorders are now believed to have developed during childhood in the patient's life (Nader, 2001).

The purpose of this research is to get information about the levels of depression, stress, and common coping strategies that these students are using or experiencing on a day-to-day basis. The objective is to bring awareness to the public about mental health in students and the ways in which students are coping with the stressors of their lives, and these results should assist with that. The ultimate goal is to make teachers and parents more alert for signs of mental health issues and negative coping strategies in adolescents, and to make the topic of mental health a common and easy subject to discuss.

Literature Review

Trauma and the Adolescent's Brain

An important aspect to look at while thinking about stressors and traumas in an adolescent's life is the impact that they can have on their brain development and functioning. Gabowitz, Zucker, and Cook (2008) refer to a complex trauma as an experience in an individual's life that occurs within the child's upbringing. These traumas can be things like, "sexual, emotional, and physical abuse; neglect; loss; and witnessing domestic and community violence" (Gabowitz, Zucker, & Cook, 2008, pg. 163). Early on, these traumas can put the victim at risk for other disorders; the victim is particularly at risk for mood, anxiety, substance abuse, eating, conduct, personality, dissociative, and attention/learning disorders. The school districts should use this information to become aware of what to look for when they are working with an adolescent. It would also be helpful to pass information about past traumas

onto faculty members so that they can be aware of the possibility of negative behaviors occurring in that adolescent. Adolescents may deal with trauma by "acting out, risk-taking and self-destructive behaviors (e.g., sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, dangerous reenactment behavior, and delinquency), as well as depression, withdrawn behaviors, and somatic complaints" (Gabowitz, et al., 2008, pg. 166).

According to Nader (2011), trauma can also impact an adolescent by affecting their ability to view relationships as dependable or nurturing (Nader, 2011). If an adolescent is withdrawing while in school they may have been or currently be experiencing some form of trauma in their life and need help. It would be important for faculty members to be aware of all of these signs so that they can help these adolescents.

Importance of Coping Skills

Coping skills are becoming a much more common form of intervention for individuals as well as emphasizing the importance of finding healthy coping skills at a young age. In a multisite study about coping skills among adolescent suicide attempters by Bojan Mirkovic and colleagues (2006) it was hypothesized that the use of healthy coping mechanisms can lower depression scores and affect the presence of suicidal ideation. Statistically speaking, in the western world's population of adolescents suicide is one of the leading causes of death (Mirkovic et. al, 2006, S38). With this in mind, it is important to note that major depressive disorder is strongly linked to the occurrence of suicide.

There is a model that was created by Frydenberg and Lewis (2006) which differentiates between productive and nonproductive coping styles. Productive coping styles are to "focus on solving the problem, work hard to achieve, focus on the positive, seek relaxing diversions, and physical recreation". Nonproductive coping styles include: "worry, wishful thinking, not coping, tension reduction, ignore the problem, self-blame, kept to self, and seek to belong". The majority of nonproductive coping styles are centered on avoiding feelings (Mirkovic et. al, 2006, S40). Being aware of these different types of coping styles, as well as having knowledge about their effectiveness, could benefit anyone working in the school system. If an adolescent is presenting nonproductive coping styles a faculty member can use their knowledge on the subject matter to help foster healthier coping skills.

The results of this study correlated with what the researchers hypothesized. The adolescents who used productive coping skills had lower depression scores and less suicidal ideation as a result. It was found that the adolescents who still presented suicidal ideation were more likely using non-productive coping skills. The study found that there are actually three coping strategies that can be precursors of depression which are not self-blame and tension reduction. Looking at the results of this study, it would be helpful for

school faculty to encourage productive coping skills (Mirkovic et. al, 2006, S44).

Stress during Adolescence

Many adults forget the amount of stress that students experience. In reality, the time spent in adolescence is considered the most unstable time period in an individual's life. Adolescents are no longer children who are totally dependent on their parents/guardians, but they are not yet adults with the stability of a job and/or family. Most adolescents have to deal with the stress of school, home life, and social life. On top of these three main stressors, "according to Erikson, the major task of adolescence is identity formation" (Allison, Adlaf & Mates, 1997, p. 253). This includes difficult tasks such as deciding the direction of one's future. The intensity of an adolescent's stress concerning their future could increase due to "well-meaning" adults who have high expectations for them; this is especially true when it comes to academia. Adolescent's social relationships can also be a source of stress because of the "pressures to conform to group norms regarding clothing styles, patterns of speech and leisure pursuits" (Allison et. Al, 1997, p. 254). There can also be stressors in adolescent's home life. Some aspects that can be of concern are the relationship between the adolescents and their parents and/or siblings. There can also be additional stressors in regards to how free time is being spent, tension in the household, and disagreements on the rules of the house (Allison et. al, 1997, p. 253-254). This is all important for faculty members to keep in mind. Although it is easy to look at these adolescents as children, the majority of them are dealing with a great amount of different stressors and need guidance in finding healthy coping skills.

Risk of Depression in Schools

Dunn (2015) notes some key statistics such as approximately 12% of young people meet the criteria to be diagnosed with major depression and about 29% of high school students have reported feelings of sadness or hopelessness almost every day for about 2 weeks. It is critical to be looking at school districts for mental health issues in youth because schools educate more than 95% of adolescents for a large portion of their adolescent life (Dunn Milliren, Evans, Subramanian, & Richmond, 2015, 732). This article not only focused on the school districts, it also looked at the neighborhoods in which youth are growing up. Unlike in schools, the neighborhoods are a place where youth have the most "unstructured" time; this makes it just as important to look at as the youths structured time spent in school.

Dunn and colleagues' main purpose was to look at youth health and behaviors in schools and neighborhoods. It was found that schools may have a more prominent impact on depressive symptoms among these adolescents. This is critical because it would be important for all school districts to look

at interventions for their adolescents to help reduce and screen for depressive symptoms. It also makes sense that school systems would be the first line of defense when it comes to major depression because during school students have large amounts of adult supervision. School districts are now integrating different types of health as well as developmental interventions. Adding mental health to the list of interventions a school instigates could be extremely beneficial for the adolescents. Lastly, schools do have these opportunities to educate and even perform mental health screenings on their students which makes it the optimal place to monitor their mental health status and be able to intervene if necessary (Dunn et al., 2015, 737-738).

Supports in School Districts

School systems are not only places for education, but also are primary social settings for adolescents. In the article, "Implementing Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports in High Schools: Contextual Factors and Stages of Implementation" by Jessica Swain-Bradway and colleagues, the issue of implanting positive behavior intervention and support is discussed. It shows that many high schools are actually behind in this area compared to elementary schools (Swain-Bradway, Pinkney, & Flannery, 2015, 245). In short, this intervention is meant to include all students and each student's specific needs. For example, if an adolescent had consistent behavioral issues in school, a positive behavior intervention would be used to make an individual plan for that adolescent depending on why these negative behaviors are occurring. This could be an extremely effective screening process for adolescents throughout their schooling life for not only mental health and drug use, but a wide variety of other issues that can hinder academic success. This research showed a direct relationship between the positive behaviors intervention and academic success and social behaviors. This intervention supports the theory that social behaviors are a means to academic success (Swain-Bradway, 2015, 246-247). By seeing that social behaviors and academic success are related it makes it an easy choice to further monitor and help adolescents

Problematic Substance Use in Adolescence

Substance use can have a devastating effect on adolescents academically and personally. The negative effects have the likelihood of lasting into adulthood. Substance abuse can also be linked to symptoms of depression as well as poor academic performance. According to Russel Falck (2012), "research shows that the earlier the age of onset of drug use, the greater the likelihood of later abuse and/or dependence" (Falck, Nahhas, & Carlson, 2012, 217). This is why having an earlier intervention with adolescents can make all the difference in their current and future success.

Something else for school systems to keep in mind is the homes

students come from. A study was done by Dusan Backovic and colleagues where they looked at the difference of substance use in adolescents living in foster care and those living with their birth families. The results of their study showed that adolescents who have tried marijuana or tobacco were most commonly seen in the foster care system (Backovic, Grujlcic-Sipetic, & Mksimovic, 2006, 341). After seeing these results, it would be a good idea for school districts to not only have intervention services available for their adolescents, but also prevention services for adolescents that may be at risk.

After looking at all of this information it is clear that school districts should be focusing on mental health and substance abuse issues throughout students' academic lives. Helping these students learn about good mental health and positive coping skills can help them avoid extreme traumas and dependency issues throughout their entire lives.

Methods

This project involved collecting data from the Menomonie School District and Colfax School District. The data involved surveys that were recently taken by middle and high school students. The surveys looked at the adolescents' substance use and why they were using these substances. It also included information on their mental wellness. After collecting the data from the school districts I looked at the results for 8th and 12th grade students and then analyzed what was found.

Results & Discussion

The Colfax Youth AODA survey was completed by 7th – 12th graders, but for the purposes of this research only data from 8th and 12th grade students were examined. Fifteen percent of the responses were from 8th graders and 12% of the responses were from 12th graders.

After the first three generic questions the students were asked who the specific caring adults were in their lives. It was not a surprise that in both grades Mom and Dad were the top responses. Something that was interesting to see was the fact that when looking at students in 8th grade only two responded with school personnel as being a caring adult, but in 12th grade there were six responses that school personnel were important caring adults in their lives. This shows that as adolescents are maturing into young adults they are attributing more importance to their teachers. This could be because they are at a point in their lives when they are looking forward to their future in a professional manner. Teachers may see signs of mental health issues such as depression or anxiety, as well as the use of negative coping skills such as substance use and abuse.

The next prompt had the students answer two questions. How often they felt (1) little interest or pleasure in doing things and (2) feeling down, depressed or hopeless. An interesting finding is that a statistically significant

amount of students in the 8th grade responded with "Nearly Every Day" to questions 1 and 2 even though most of the students responded with "Not at all" or "Several Days" to both questions. Although there is not a majority of students who have these feelings, there is still a significant amount that do and would benefit from support.

One of the most insightful questions was a short answer question that asked, "As a young adult, what are some of your greatest struggles?" The most common responses for 8th grade students were: no problems, school and family struggles, essays, and specific school assignments. Some specific issues for the 8th grade students were: depression, self-harm, fitting in, finding a job, and having your parents go through a divorce. During this difficult time students are dealing with a wide variety of stressors and concerns, so depression and self-harm can become a very real possibility. Having the faculty at the school trained to see these warning signs, as well as informing parents and students of the negative implications of unhealthy coping skills, could help make mental health topics an easy subject to discuss for all of the parties involved.

Students in 12th grade listed school and managing multiple commitments as their most common responses to this question. Having to stay on top of school, college applications, a part-time job, and a social life can make this period of time in a student's life overwhelming. Some specific comments that were made by 12th grade students were peer pressure, popularity, sex, relationships, friends, alcohol, beer parties, homework, sports, and maintaining a social life. This shows that as adolescents are maturing partying becomes a more accessible option. Peer pressure when it comes to sex, drugs and alcohol is increasing at this age. Because of this, it's important to have an open dialogue regarding these issues.

The students who listed specific drugs reported that the most popular drugs were methamphetamine and marijuana. It is vital that students be aware that these drugs are in the school system, but it could also mean that these drugs could be easy to access in school or in their community.

There was also a survey done by the Menomonie School district for 7th through 12th grade students that was centered on substance use. The goal was to find out how popular these substances were in each grade. The Menomonie School District survey covered a wide range of topics when it comes to alcohol and substance abuse. When it comes to having access to alcohol, boys and girls in the 8th and 12th grades most commonly responded that were getting alcohol from friends and at parties. It was surprising that in 8th grade a higher percentage of boys and girls reported getting alcohol from their parents than in 12th grade. This could mean that they are sneaking or stealing alcohol from their parents more in 8th grade. For boys and girls the most popular answers regarding reasons for substance abuse focused around escaping from school, family, personal problems, sadness, loneliness, anger,

or to get high or smashed. This was in respect to both 8th and 12th grade students. The most common answer all around was "to relax". Relaxing could mean the same thing as escaping problems, and substance abuse would be categorized as a negative coping skill when other skills could be utilized. Something intriguing was the fact that more 8th grade students responded to the option "because my friends do" for reasons why they use drugs than 12th grade students. This could be because in 8th grade students may be feeling more pressure to fit in somewhere and unfortunately using drugs has become a very popular part of today's youth culture. In contrast, in 12th grade the issue of parties becomes a bigger issue. With the increased freedom that comes with becoming an adult, parties that involve illegal substances become more tempting. The next chart regards substance abuse and the consequences that the adolescents can self-identify with at that moment. Some common answers for both grades were using the substance of choice more than intended, and not being able to remember what they said or did. With age the numbers increased for both of these responses. This could be because adolescents and young adults are testing their limits more and using more than the 8th grade students. Some very negative and scary responses were that the 12th grade students in particular are now dealing with drinking and driving, or riding in a car with someone who was drinking. Making sure to have programs regarding drug safety in school as the students age could help safeguard them to the risks of substance abuse.

The next section of the survey specifically examined the mental health status and support system of 8th and 12th grade boys. In the survey regarding core indicators of alcohol use in boys it is important to note that the frequency of use is increasing dramatically from 8th grade into the 12th grade. One section of the survey is about the poor mental health status of boys. The percentage of boys who reported they were feeling discouraged, hopeless, and feeling like giving up last year more than doubled from 8th to 12th grade; this was also the case when it came to feeling stressed quite a bit (almost more than they could take) within the last year (the survey results did not provide information regarding students actively seeking help for those issues). 33% of boys in the 12th grade reported having suicidal thoughts in their lives. Helping students become more comfortable talking to a trusted adult could help them learn to cope with stressful situations that they will undoubtedly face throughout their life. Many boys also saw some sort of physical symptoms when it came to their mental health that could be very disruptive throughout their day; for example, 21% of 8th graders and 33% of 12th graders reported getting a lot of headaches, stomachaches or some other sort of sickness. These symptoms could be interfering with their school days and social lives, so helping out students and educating them on positive mental health would be productive to all parties.

Another great help to students is their support system. There are

a small number of students who feel like they have no one to turn to, and these are the students that should be especially focused on because they are at the greatest risk of substance use and poor mental health - they feel like they have no one they can depend on. On a more positive note, the survey showed that a good majority of the male students in both grades reported engaging in meaningful activities in their lives such as homework, religious activities, volunteering, clubs, and sports. These activities can make the students feel as if they have a purpose in their lives and could give them a support system.

As was seen with the boys, the girls also showed a major increase in alcohol use from 8th to 12th grade. Looking at the poor mental health status of girls, the girls in general had higher numbers throughout the entire chart. The most shocking statistic was that 42% of girls in the 12th grade admitted to having suicidal thoughts. This is worrisome and should be something that is addressed throughout the school system. These young women should be getting more support throughout their day, especially since such a large majority of a student's time is spent in school. The school system can be one of the best and most effective resources to reach adolescents; this is especially true with serious topics such as substance abuse and mental health problems. As with boys, a small number of girls in both 8th and 12th grade did feel as if they did not have a good support system in their lives. This is an issue that could cause serious problems in any adolescent's life.

Similar to the boys, a good majority of the female students did have meaningful activities in their lives. Having more activities available to students in school could have positive effect on everyone. If students are involved in at least one activity then they are more likely to build a positive support system in their life.

Conclusion

This research shows that adolescents going through critical transitional periods in their lives are at an increased risk for mental health issues. Having early interventions with these adolescents has been shown to be an extremely effective way of dealing with this issue. Future research should explore further interventions to place in the school systems.

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