Title Adolescents and Social Anxiety

Extended essay
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Why are adolescents more prone to experiencing social anxiety than adults?

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Introduction

Anxiety is one of the many interesting aspects of the psychological parts of the brain. But what is anxiety? "Anxiety is a future oriented mood state associated with preparation for possible, upcoming negative events." (Craske, , Rauch, , Ursano, , Prenoveau, , Pine, , & Zimbarg, . 2009) It may also be defined as doing something with a feeling of unease. Anxiety may be differed into two types- normal anxiety and an anxiety disorder. Normal anxiety is a very natural feeling in most humans which may be considered beneficial at times. "Low levels of anxiety may be beneficial in helping a person to remain alert in situations that require focus and can also improve performance in some areas." Johnson and Malow-Iroff (2008) For example, when a student has a sports match, the feeling of nervousness for this match may be defined as anxiety and it may be beneficial as it would encourage the student to practice and work hard in order to do good in the match. While the first type of anxiety may have some benefits, the other type may not be so beneficial. An anxiety disorder is described as "too much" normal anxiety. "High levels of anxiety can be debilitating and can cause interference with the daily routines experienced at different points in development such as separating from parents, going to school or work, and making friends in new social situations." Johnson and Malow-Iroff (2008) There are many different types of anxiety disorders such as post-traumatic stress, social anxiety, phobia, obsessive-compulsive etc. Social anxiety disorder is the third most common disorder observed in adolescents and adults around the world. It has also been observed that the growth of anxiety is typically noticed in adolescents more than adults as they are more vulnerable to experiencing anxiety than adults. (APA1994) But the question is why are adolescents more prone to experiencing anxiety than adults? One reason for this may be that there is a larger number of anxiety causing
factors that affect adolescents than adults. This increasing factor in society is becoming a worry because this young generation will be shaping the society one day and what kind of role models will this generation make for the coming generations. Anxiety is a major problem because adolescents that suffer from a social anxiety disorder may experience many problems related to things such as substance abuse etc. (Beidel and Turner, 2007 and Pine et al., 1998). These psychological issues have a very big impact on our future generations and must be understood and brought attention to.

When a child enters the adolescence period, many biological, physiological and psychological changes occur. Adolescence is considered to be the time period between the beginning of puberty and transitioning to an adult. (Drever, 1952) There are three stages in the adolescence period- early, middle and late. "Early adolescence roughly the period from age ten to thirteen, is dominated by pubertal change" (pg.4) During this transition period an individual is changing in every aspect of life. This is a time period when an individual develops their identity. Not only are they going through sociological changes, but also psychological changes. In this journey of building a new identity, an individual goes through many situations and must face several problems on the way. An adolescent may not be able to cope with every situation as effectively as an adult may be able to but why is that so? The answer to this question is that adults are individuals who are not only older than adolescents in age but also tend to have a lot more experiences. These experiences help them gain skills needed to deal with various types of situations. Adults have many more skills than adolescents which help them in facing a situation much more effectively. Deborah Yurgen-Todd (2007) This is the reason why adolescents are not quite as successful in dealing with situations related to anxiety causing factors such as peer pressure, stress,
parental issues, fear of negative evaluation and isolation. Experience and skills may not be the only advantages adults have over adolescents, they also have a psychological maturity advantage. Some parts of the brain which can help in dealing with situations, develop with increasing age. Deborah Yurgen-Todd (2007) Another factor to consider is that levels of anxiety tend to increase in middle and late adolescents. Oort, Ormel, Verhulst (2012) All these biological and psychological factors lead to adults having an advantage over adolescents and so they can cope with situations better than adolescents, which is why adolescents may be more prone to experiencing anxiety.

Social Isolation

Middle adolescence is a period when an adolescent goes through enormous changes, for many that is changing from middle school to high school. This change from early to middle adolescence is the time when adolescents are most vulnerable to experience an anxiety disorder. (Beidel, Turner, & Morris, 1999) During this period of time an adolescent is anxious about entering a completely new environment, but this type of anxiety is considered to be natural anxiety which anyone can face when they enter a new environment. The level of anxiety varies in each individual and depends somewhat on their experiences. This level of anxiety then in turn creates the level of expectations an individual has from themselves. (Cartwright-Hatton et al., 2003 and Erath et al., 2007) As these young adults enter this new environment their first and most important goal is to "fit in" as soon as possible. If an adolescent doesn't fit in they get isolated. Social isolation and anxiety have a significant relationship. (Margalit 2010) Loneliness (isolation) causes the development of social anxiety. (Margalit 2010) Isolation from
peers and parents is one of the most common problems faced by adolescents. Levine (1981) This factor is considerably less in adults. In a survey conducted at Gloucestershire by Lillyman and Und (2007) it was found that only 11% of adults stated fear of isolation, which is much less compared to adolescents. One of the reasons for this fear was being unable to communicate and connect with the community, which is having lesser or no chances to be able to participate in different activities and experiencing things. Fear of isolation is noticed in older adults. (Cornwell and Waite 2009) Both adolescents and adults have the desire to connect with people from the same age group and thus have a fear of isolation. The factors which lead to the isolation of adolescents and adults are different. Social isolation is a factor which may cause anxiety. Lukkes (2008)

**Peer Pressure and It's Psychological Aspects**

During the adolescence peer conformity increase quite a lot. "The way his peers perceive him strongly influences the adolescents conception of himself, which generally remains unchanged throughout his life." Kizziar and Hagedorn (1979) Adolescents try to explore everything around them in order to realize their potential and the things they like, which is build an identity of their own. Adolescence is the key period where one develops an identity. Erikson and Erikson (1997) “Adolescence also entails a shift in the primary audience for personal storytelling, from parents, to friends and romantic partners, and there are also relationship-specific facets of listeners roles.” Pasupathi, Weeks (2011) Peers tend to support the way an adolescent changes, safety is a factor that may not matter much because in their views the adolescent is exploring life and building an identity. Pasupathi, Weeks (2011) In the process of building this identity, adolescents tend to get more influenced by peers and may sometime do things that may not be safe or right. Gardner and Steinberg (2012)Peer

The feeling of acceptance from someone is what causes them to do certain things that they are anxious about. Before participating in risky situations, adolescents focus more on the benefits than the risks and negative outcomes. Gardner and Steinberg (2012) Sometimes in order to avoid being isolated adolescents give in to the pressure of others in order to meet group standards. This "giving in" is known as peer pressure. Adolescents are more likely to give into peer pressure than adults. Gardner and Steinberg (2012) So adolescents are more likely to have social anxiety than adults because of peer pressure. Adults compared to adolescents have a much stronger ability to act independently of the influence of peers. Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996).

David Vance in his book "Towards a General Theory of Social Psychology: Understanding Human Cruelty, Human Misery, and, Perhaps, a Remedy (A Theory of the Socialization Process) by Wendy Treynor" discovered the actual process behind peer pressure that occurs in the brain. The hypothesis "identity shift effect" described how the process of peer pressure works. It works in the following way: When an individual fails to conform to their groups' standards their state of harmony is disrupted. So the individual gives in to the pressure in order to "fit in" and meet the groups' standard. While doing this, the individual violates their own standards so an internal conflict arises. So now the external conflict has ended but an internal one has arisen. In order to end this internal conflict from ever arising again, the individual changes their standards to that of the group. This process of changing their standards to another's is known as an "identity shift". At the end they have a new identity and are a new person in a way who may not be "better". This is again due to the fear of being rejected and isolated. Social identity shift is common in adolescents. Tanti,
Stukas, Halloran, Foddy (2011)

There are two types of peer pressure- positive and negative. Fanning (2003) When peer pressure is brought up, the process has quite a negative connotation but it is discovered that it may not always be negative. Negative or positive peer pressure depends on the individual itself. For eg. if an individual chooses a group of peers which work to get involved in school activities and get good grades, the individual may also get influenced to do so. This way they will meet their group expectations and are doing themselves good in the way. This type of peer pressure is considered good. At the University of Michigan, The Family Survey Study was conducted which found that peer pressure tends to do good most of the time. It was discovered that peers encouraged their friends to engage in positive activities related to school rather than pressure them into doing something negative and harmful such as substance use. This type of peer pressure is considered to be positive but this may not be the case in every relationship. Negative peer pressure is pressure to do something wrong and possibly harmful such as smoking.

**Age and Brain Development**

Adolescence is a time period where an adolescent goes through many changes. During this time period adolescents develop many social and emotional skills and improve existing ones. These skills include speed of information processing, dependance on personal relationships etc. Deborah Yurgelun-Todd (2007) Many changes occur in neurological processes as well. Deborah Yurgelun-Todd (2007) As the adolescent’s age increases, various parts of the brain that improve skills to cope with a risk taking situation develop. A part of the brain called dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, processes risk taking situations very effectively. As the age of the adolescent increases, the activity in the
prefrontal cortex increases while facing a risky situation. Yurgelun-Todd, Killgore (2006) The
dorsolateral prefrontal cortex doesn’t fully develop till the age of twenty two. Giedd (2004) So adults
have an advantage over adolescents, because the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is fully developed and
can thus help adults evaluate and cope with a situation better than an adolescent.

Lau et al. (2011) conducted an experiment to determine the different ways in which the
brains of adolescents and adults processed the same stimuli. The researchers used functional Magnetic
Resonance Imaging (fMRI) machines in the process to see how blood flowed through the various parts
of the brain. The participants were shown images of neutral and scary expressions which being scanned
by the fMRI machine. The results showed that high degree of activation was happening in the
hippocampus and amygdala of the teens while they were viewing the pictures. While on the other hand,
researchers found activity in the part of the brain called dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC). This
part of the brain develops later on in life not at adolescence. This is the reason why adults may be able
to handle a situation more effectively than an adolescent because the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex
(DLPFC) is able to identify a situation or more specifically a threat more accurately which in turn
reduces their fear and anxiety about that situation. The adolescent brain which is still developing may not
be able to do that so that is the reason why they may experience more anxiety than an adult while facing
the same situation. Another study which connected the development of the brain of an adolescent to
their skills was done by Pfeifer, Ore, Gallagher and Michell (2011). They conducted an experiment over
the time period of three years with the same adolescents. In the experiment, the researchers used fMRI
machines to measure blood flow in the brain of the adolescents at age 10 and age 13, while they are
being shown pictures of neutral emotions. The researchers found that activity in the ventral striatum (a
region in the brain) had a relation to an individual's self-reported ability to avoid peer pressure. They noticed that as the ability to deflect peer pressure increased so did the activity in the ventral striatum. The study showed that the older the adolescent is, the more susceptible they may be to peer pressure.

**Stress and Anxiety**

Stress is a feeling we all feel everyday in our busy lives. It has in a way become part of our life, a feeling we have learnt to experience continually. Stress is not just a feeling, it is a very harmful disease in disguise. It causes harm to every aspect of the body whether it be biological or psychological. In biological terms, stress may cause an individual to have diseases such as blood pressure, heart stroke, obesity, heart attacks and many more diseases. In psychological sense, stress has a significant relationship with anxiety as well as fear. Kinsey, Bailey, Sheridan, Padgett, Avisur (2007) The different ways in which fear and anxiety occur in the brain was first discovered by Michael Davis at Emory University. Anxiety as described by Davis "is a more prolonged and diffuse response that involves a broader network of brain circuits." Park & Magazine (2011) Experts have discovered that hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) (a part of fear response) is constantly activated while experiencing anxiety. "Keeping that signal alive may be the responsibility of the brain region known as the bed nucleus of the stria terminals (BNST), which regulates the autonomic part of our nervous system, including heart and breathing rates, and is more active in the brains of anxiety-disorder patients. The BNST is fueled by adrenaline, which means the HPA axis, unlike the fear response, may not always involve cortisol." This theory was based on the understanding of Davis.

At the University of Michigan, Abelson(year) conducted a study with participants who were afraid of driving. An hour before the participants arrived and during the test drive, the researcher
measured the level of cortisol in each participants' saliva. The results showed that the level of cortisol was the same at both times despite the fact that the participants felt anxious and worried while driving. This study supports the fact that the response to anxiety may be different from that of the response to fear.

Now the relationship between anxiety and stress. Stress can be caused by many things depending on the situation. When a person is anxious they feel nervous and prepare by worrying which is stressing. When an individual is stressed, a hormone named cortisol is released with many other hormones. Cortisol may be harmful if it stays for too long in the body. In adolescents, stress may be caused by problems related to social pressure. One common problem faced by pretty much every adolescent/child is stage fright. How anxiety and stress work in this situation are that when a person thinks about going on stage they think of all the negative outcomes of the situation and thus get stressed. Due to this anxiety and stress they start preparing for their performance. A few minutes before their performance they probably feel something like sweaty palms. Hingley(1985) This is nervousness caused by performance anxiety. Hingley(1985) This type of anxiety is short and natural, it is not an anxiety disorder. So the relationship between stress and anxiety is that anxiety is at times caused by stress. In adults stress may be cause by occupational pressures, smoking etc. Motowidlo, Packard and Manning.(1988), Parrott (1999)The way to reduce anxiety and stress in most cases would be by instead of pressurizing families would support and encourage their children and adolescents to do better at thing they are comfortable in doing.

Parent-Child Relationships and issues related to trust

The foundation of every relationship is trust. It is the main key to building a healthy relationship.
but many times it is seen that this trust is missing mainly in a parent-child relationship. This lack of trust is mainly considered to be a protective feeling from the parents which is misinterpreted by the adolescents (A. Freud, 1958). During this period the main goal of an adolescent is to build an identity and for this the adolescent has the desire to experience every aspect of life. Peer conformity increases while parental consent decreases. (Ginsburg, Festa, 2011) Insecurities may promote an environment that not only cause the development of anxiety but also maintain it. On one hand over control from parents may cause social anxiety, while on the other hand, acceptance from peers causes less chances of social anxiety in an individual. (Ginsburg, Festa, 2011) This factor of insecurity is thus considered to be a cause of social anxiety disorder in adolescents. (Marassisi et al. 1994; Warren et al. 1997) It is possible to say that the different types of parenting may provide different types of effects in their child. Wood et al. (2003) and McLeod et al. (2007) discovered that parenting types such as overly controlling and overly soliciting may cause social anxiety disorder and other disorders while parenting types such as warm parenting decreases the chance of their children/adolescents having anxiety. This risk factor only affects adolescents. Adults aren’t affected because adults are the ones who are in a way causing it.

**Conclusion**

Anxiety is a slow and quiet killer, one doesn’t even realize how much they have lost to this disorder. Instead of exploring opportunities and enjoying life, some adolescents end up living their high school years in misery and silence. The cause of this might be that there is no one to understand their silence and help them through this problem known as anxiety. There is a significant difference in the percentage of adolescents experiencing anxiety and adults experiencing anxiety. Adolescents are more prone to this disorder because of the large number of risk factors affecting them, some which are caused
by adults and many of which can be prevented by them. Changes must be made in order to reduce this disorder which is increasing significantly. Changes are always hard to adjust to, but at the end it's always for the best. There are some things our society must change in order to reduce problems like anxiety. Expectations which is one of the main cause of stress and in turn anxiety must be changed. The way society demonstrates expectations is by pressurizing. Expectations should not be there to pressurize but to encourage and if they are not met, it's not the end of the world. If one didn't do good once, there's always a second time. This is just one example, there are many other factors that need to be looked upon but the best way to reduce anxiety in adolescents as well as adults is by being aware of the symptoms and seeking help at the right time.
References


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