

Summary

Adolescence is a time of change and uncertainty: biological, psychological, emotional, and behavioral. In a highly competitive society like Hong Kong's, many adolescents experience stress, often exacerbated by personal, familial, and social factors. How young people cope with stress is therefore worthy of investigation.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1948), "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." In other words, in addition to keeping a good physical condition and preventing diseases, a person's mental, emotional, and social health is also important.

The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (HKFYG) has conducted various kinds of related research over the decades, and results showed that Hong Kong young people inevitably face different levels of stress. The HKFYG Hotline Counselling service received over 16,400 cases relating to emotional distress, with more than 2,100 cases for post-secondary school students, between September 2015 and August 2016. This constitutes a 60% increase on the figures for the previous year, suggesting that stress and its resultant emotional problems are growing among young people.

Adolescents are the pillars of our future society. It has long been the concern of society to ensure that young people have a healthy and joyous development. This research obtains data through territory-wide telephone polling with young people, case studies of young people experiencing stress, and interviews with scholars or experts. It is hoped that this research will provide a clearer picture of the issues related to stress and will result in recommendations that might assist the authorities concerned with the healthy development of young people.

Major Findings

- 1. Over 20% of the respondents claimed they were under great stress. Nearly 25% said they usually or always ‘felt nervous or stressed’. This showed that there is a prevalent issue with young people experiencing stress.**

Our random sample telephone survey successfully polled 520 Hong Kong young people aged 12-29. More than half of the respondents (62.8%) indicated that they were under stress (6-10 points)¹ while 22.3% claimed they were under great stress (8-10 points). Moreover, nearly a quarter of the respondents (24.3%) said that they “felt nervous and stressful” in the month before the poll. The data showed that there is a prevalent issue with Hong Kong youth experiencing stress.

In addition, the experts interviewed commented that Hong Kong society is highly competitive, with a major focus on academic performance and achievement. Changes in family structure and parenting style, together with the rapid development of information technology, mean that young people in Hong Kong are destined to face uncertainties and the resultant stresses.

- 2. In the face of stress, deteriorating moods, anxiety, and insomnia were the most common symptoms. The average period of stress was 39.5 days.**

The telephone survey showed that, in the face of stress, nearly one third of respondents (31.2%) experienced ‘deteriorating mood’, and more than one fifth experienced ‘anxiety’ (26.0%) and ‘insomnia’ (21.1%) respectively. These were followed by ‘poor temper’ (17.6%) and ‘loss of motivation’ (13.8%). Furthermore, 1.7% of respondents indicated they had ‘suicidal tendencies’. The average period of stress was 39.5 days.

¹ On a 0-10 scale, 10 indicates extremely stressed and 5 indicates normal

The 20 case studies showed that stress has an impact on young people's physical, psychological, and behavioral conditions. The physiological consequences included prolonged insomnia, skin allergies, headaches, stomachaches, and vomiting. The psychological impacts included frequent weeping, poor temper, loss of emotional control, and nervousness. The behavioral impacts included self-concealment, self-harm, fighting, drinking, and suicidal tendencies. Without proper stress alleviation negative consequences will arise for young people, which may trigger mental or emotional health problems.

3. When they are under stress, more than 80% of the respondents indicated that they would seek help, mostly with friends. Around 17% of the respondents indicated that they would not seek help.

The telephone survey showed that, an overwhelming proportion of the respondents (81.7%) would seek help when they experienced stress, while 16.7% said they would not. Among those who would seek help, most would turn to their friends (91.7%); this was followed by family (45.2%), and classmates (13.5%). In contrast, for those who would not seek help, the major reasons were that they thought 'they could handle the stress themselves' (36.3%), 'no one can help them' (28.5%), and 'they do not want to bother other people' (23.1%).

The case studies show that underestimating the problem of stress, not admitting to experiencing stress, having no-one to talk to, not knowing how to express themselves, or feeling embarrassed to share the problem all inhibit young people from seeking help, leading to more devastating results.

4. Young people were concerned about their emotional health, but had limited knowledge about emotional support services.

The telephone polling results show that the respondents were concerned about their emotional health, with an average of 6.86 points (on a scale of 0-10 points). In contrast, respondents were generally unaware of the available emotional support services, with an average of 5.67 points. This reveals that young people are concerned about their emotional health, but they only have limited knowledge about the available emotional support services.

The experts interviewed added that the youth are the future of society. There is a need to promote an environment to let them experience a healthy and happy young life. The family, school, and society need to work together to help young people to build up a positive attitude in response to stress. Young people also need to address the experience of their own stress and seek help when necessary, so they can receive the support they need.

Major Discussions

Summarizing the results of the telephone survey, case studies, and interviews, the research raises five major discussions.

1. The consequences of young people's stress are profound, and require attention from society.

Adolescence is a time of change and uncertainty. There are physiological, psychological, emotional, and behavioral changes. All these changes definitely bring about stress and worries to young people. In addition to the rapid development of society, growth of information technology, and changes in family structure, young people today face many challenges and their impacts. The research results show that stress is a common experience for young people in Hong Kong. If stress is not alleviated properly and in a timely manner, there can be problems such as prolonged insomnia, anti-socialization, loss of emotional control, or even self-harm and emotional disorder. This problem deserves the attention of society.

2. Academia, Career, Prospects, Family Relationships, and Finance were the major sources of stress.

The stresses experienced by young people are the result of both internal and external factors. The research results show that academia, career, prospects, family relationships, and personal finance are the major sources of adolescent stress. Stress is a personal matter that everyone deals with differently. When one cannot reach the expectations of others, or fails to fulfill one's own self-demands, stress arises. The stress young people are experiencing is also closely related to their personal lives. The case studies show that most interviewees were affected by more than one source of stress, each of which is related to their personal life.

3. The response of young people in Hong Kong to stress is in general positive, although some react negatively or pessimistically.

Not only do people view stress diversely, but they also cope with it differently. The research results show that more respondents chose to cope with stress in positive ways, such as seeking help, doing exercise, and listening to music or singing. In contrast, some respondents adopted negative ways to cope with stress, such as self-concealment, drinking, smoking, self-harm, or even venting their emotions on themselves. Moreover, such behavior weakens young peoples' abilities to manage stress. Although only a small number of young people respond negatively to stress, it is still a matter of concern, as the prolonged stress can be harmful to their emotional and mental health.

4. The family structure, personalities, and the availability of resources for stress management all contribute to young people's ability to withstand stress.

It was found that the family structure, personalities, and the availability of resources for stress management all contribute to a young person's ability to withstand stress. There are different parenting styles in different family structures, such as core family, single-parent family, stepfamily, and new migrant family. These can result in various challenges to young people's growth and their ability to manage stress. In terms of personality, the case studies indicated that some interviewees lacked self-confidence, denied their abilities, and considered themselves useless. Some respondents also found it difficult to express themselves, had a tendency to be over worried, and felt negative. The emotions of these young people easily fluctuated with personal issues, and they were more likely to experience stress.

The case studies also reveal that some interviewees had narrow social networks, poor social resources, and sometimes felt left out

or boycotted. They had limited resources at hand, and this weakened their ability to alleviate stress. For this group of potentially at-risk young people, early identification and timely intervention may provide them with resources to better manage their stress and to help build a positive attitude.

5. The main reasons for young people not dealing with stress include lack of emotional understanding, inability to deal with stress, worries about not being accepted, not admitting they have a problem, and concerns about being stigmatized.

Lack of understanding of their emotions, inability to deal with stress, concerns about not being accepted, not admitting they have a problem, and concerns about being stigmatized all contribute to young people disregarding their own experiences of stress. The experts suggested that young people in the new generation do not understand their own emotions, and do not know how to cope with problems because they are used to suppressing their emotions. In contrast, some young people do not think they have a problem with stress, believing that they are simply experiencing an effect of puberty. Others would rather hide the problems than confront them, probably due to a lack of confidence, being afraid to express their problems to others and worried that they would not be accepted. One of the case studies indicated that society has limited awareness about the problem of stress, so they are worried that they would be stigmatized as problematic or weak. Therefore, the problem of stress is not tackled in a timely manner.

Since young people have a limited understanding of stress and emotions, or experience low self-confidence, they usually do not, or do not know how to, cope with their problems. This hinders them from seeking help from professionals, friends, or family, and may lead to greater risks.

Suggestions

This research puts forward six suggestions.

1. Making good use of additional educational resources, strengthening the ability of students to manage stress. Fully subsidizing all senior primary and junior secondary school students to join outdoor education camps to boost their confidence, communication abilities, and problem-solving skills.
2. Promoting a territory-wide “healthy life campaign.” The government should take the lead to liaise with families, schools, corporations, and regional organizations to raise public awareness of healthy living.
3. Developing a long-term strategic direction to promote the physical and mental health of young people. The government should understand the trend of young people’s experiences of stress, and coordinate the relevant services and measures that different stakeholders provide.
4. Encouraging young people to promote stress management, such as sharing ideas about “how to befriend stress.” This would enable young people to share their experiences of positive stress management in an appropriately youth-friendly way.
5. Launching an instant online counselling platform for students. The government should allocate resources to develop an online support platform or app for secondary schools in Hong Kong.
6. Identifying and providing timely help to families experiencing emotional crises. The current services could be strengthened to meet the growing demands of society.