

「香港青少年應付壓力的狀況」研究  
A Study on How Hong Kong Young People Cope with Stress

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# How Hong Kong Young People Cope With Stress

## Summary Report

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Adolescence is a stressful time for young people. Hong Kong's highly competitive society and individualistic factors such as the environment, lifestyle and cultural background means young people react differently to stress. It is obvious that those who cope better with the stresses of adolescence will also better overcome future challenges. Those who are less able sometimes find their emotional and mental health affected, which in turn may hamper later growth and development.

How young people cope with stress is therefore worthy of investigation. What are the stressful points in a young person's life? What mechanisms do young people adopt to cope with stress and what are the factors that affect their coping strategies? What are their support networks and how can society play a more pro-active role in helping young people cope with stress? This Study has been conducted through (1) an Opinion Survey of young people of Hong Kong aged between 15 and 29; and (2) in-depth interviews with young people. It is hoped that this Study 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.

The Survey was conducted between the 10th and the 23rd of August, 2004. By random sampling, 1014 young people in Hong Kong aged 15 to 29, were successfully polled, yielding a response rate of 43%, with a standard error of  $\pm 2.2\%$ . Meanwhile, a total of 20 youth aged 16 to 26 were interviewed, 9 males and 11 females.

## Discussion

### **1. Young people face various kinds of pressure nowadays. We should act before stress problems damage their mental health.**

As Hong Kong becomes more metropolitan, our life and work become more efficiency-oriented. In recent years, socio-political and economic changes within society resulted in a tough employment market where the best jobs went to the most talented. In such a highly competitive society, young people are living under immense pressure thereby potentially threatening their mental health. According to

an annual report released by the World Health Organization in 2001, one in every four people suffers from some form of mental or emotional stress<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the mental health of young people is something worthy of discussion for those who are concerned about their growth.

Adolescence is a period in which young people inevitably face different levels of stress. Although the stress levels vary, stress has an impact on young people's physical as well as emotional well being. When this problem is ignored, pressure piles up and becomes an extra emotional burden for young people that may trigger mental illness. This problem thus requires our urgent attention.

According to our telephone survey with the young people in Hong Kong, approximately 60% to 90% said they had, in one way or another, experienced stress resulting from the individual themselves, friends, families, society, studies or work. This shows the stress problem faced by young people is universal. In addition, our survey shows that 58.6% of those interviewed were not aware of the services available to them although only, 30.3% had difficulties in coping with stress.

Some of the interviewees from case interviews said they had been under constant stress without any channel for relief. Such stressful conditions manifest themselves when people cry out all of a sudden, become easily irritated, have anxiety, or have symptoms such as headache and abdominal pains. In some cases, young people become indifferent to what happens around them and suffer from poor appetite and sleeplessness. These phenomena illustrate the way stress affects the lives of young people.

The capacity to deal with stress varies among individuals. Moderate pressure on young people can be a positive challenge in their growth. It is only when stress becomes unbearable that it turns into a problem for the individual. If we fail to notice the stress problem and do not help our young people to deal with stress, the situation can deteriorate and be detrimental to their mental health.

Although young people suffer from stress and have difficulties in coping, many of them do not know where they can seek help. This shows there is much room for public education on mental health for young people.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, "The World Health Report 2001 – Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope".

Young people are important human capital for a society's development. Consequently, we must keep an eye on their mental health and let them experience a healthy and happy youth life.

**2. The "top ten" problems young people face are: future prospects, examinations, self-expectations, job expectations, unemployment, individual finances, time management, parental expectations, poor economy, relationship with boss. Markedly, four of these, young people derive from themselves. This shows that the "self" can also be a source of stress.**

Our telephone survey shows that, from the 22 items listed in relation to the causes of stress problems, the "top ten" problems selected by the interviewees were: future prospects (6.64), examinations (5.99), self-expectations (5.82), job expectations (5.76), unemployment (5.51), individual finances (5.49), time management (5.26), parental expectations (4.94), poor economy (4.91) and relationship with boss (4.88).

The statistics show that differences in gender, age and financial status all have an impact on the perception of stress among the interviewees. More women than men find stress from "time management", "self-expectations" and "examinations". Likewise, the older the person, the more he / she finds stress from "time management" and "individual finances". As for financial status, those who are working feel more stress from "self-expectations" and "individual finances" than those who are not working.

There are two kinds of stress. The first kind is derived from environmental factors such as parental expectations and the relationship with the boss. The second kind of stress comes essentially from within, for example, a person's expectation towards himself / herself or to work. Of the above "top ten" problems, four are related to the "self" such as "future prospects", "self-expectations", "individual finances" and "time management". This shows that young people have high self-expectations and are thus more likely to be stressed by internal pressure than by external factors. The fact that stress often comes from the "self" indicates a relationship between the sense of self-esteem and the level of stress. Therefore, developing a positive self-perception and building a sense of confidence among young people may help them deal with stress.

Our individual case studies reveal that the stress of young people is usually caused by the following five factors: (1) family: relationship with parents and parental expectations; (2) studies: examinations and decisions on future prospects; (3) work: heavy workloads, job-searching, job expectations and relationship with boss and colleagues; (4) emotions: relationships and stress when parting; and (5) hardship in life such as illnesses, parents' separation and consequences from committing crimes. The last factor aside, these results are consistent with those of the telephone survey.

Nowadays, Hong Kong's young people live under stress in one way or another. Recent changes in our society such as rapid technological developments, substantial economic reconstruction and keen competition in the job market, have resulted in young people worrying about their future prospects, studies and employment opportunities, thereby causing substantial amounts of stress. These stress levels are not only caused by internal self-expectations but also by external factors. For those who are capable of coping, stress can be converted into a positive stimulus for self-motivation; however, for those who have difficulties in dealing with stress, it can become a burden and exert a heavy toll.

**3. Young people in Hong Kong generally have a positive and optimistic response towards stress, although some respond more negatively and pessimistically. Our study shows that attention and encouragement from family and friends helps young people face stress with more confidence. On the other hand, those who do not tell others of their problems are relatively powerless in dealing with stress.**

Stress is a personal matter everyone deals differently with. The ways and attitudes in which people handle stress therefore vary.

According to our telephone survey, young people in Hong Kong often deal with stress in the following ways: "think the matter through seriously", "talk to friends", "relax by doing exercises and listening to music", "have confidence that they can get things in control", "keep an open mind and optimistic attitude", "believe there are ways to solve problems", "believe it is not the end of the world and there will be a way out" and "face up to the problems". The above shows that the interviewees are generally positive in facing and coping with stress.

On the other hand, our study reveals that some young people respond relatively

negatively and pessimistically to stress by: "shying away from the problems", "indulging in smoking and drinking", "taking drugs such as ketamines and marijuana", "venting their emotions on others", "assaulting others", "blaming themselves" and "engaging in self-hurting behaviour". Although the above responses are not very common among the interviewees, these findings indicate that young people are more vulnerable to resort to smoking, drinking and drug-taking when facing problems. Also worth noting is that some people try to evade the problem and decline outside help. Moreover, some even vent their emotions on themselves or others by assaulting someone or hurting themselves. Such behaviour weakens young peoples' abilities in managing stress and may trigger mental disorders if it persists.

Our case studies similarly show that some interviewees take a negative attitude towards stress. They would suppress stressful feelings; resort to smoking, drinking; taking marijuana or other drugs; or divert their emotions by scolding or assaulting other people. Some of the young people would also engage in self-blame and even self-destructive behaviour. These findings are consistent with the findings of the telephone survey.

Although only a small number of young people respond negatively to stress, those who are not taken care of at this stage may suffer from mental illnesses in the future. It therefore is important to offer assistance to these young people before their situation worsens.

Our study also shows that young people are taking an unsystematic approach to handling stress without having a consistent approach to solving their problems. This means the same person will respond positively to stress in one situation but run away from the problem in another. Letting go may be a good way of handling a problem when it cannot be immediately solved, but as Green & Ross (1996) have pointed out such an approach tends to let problems pile up and may have adverse effects in the long run.

Even though no one can be stress-free, we can choose the way we deal with stress. Some people tackle stress with ease while others want to run away from it. The approach one takes when facing stress largely depends on his / her character, attitudes towards stress, handling ability and resources. The question then is how can we enhance young people' abilities to cope with stress and which factors cause a negative attitude towards stress?

According to our case studies, young people mostly feel stressed when they suffer from setbacks at work, persistent illnesses, relationship problems or sudden changes within the family. Whether they can face these problems confidently and rise up to the situation depends to a large extent on the encouragement and support from family members.

In contrast, our telephone survey shows that ignoring problems and not wanting others to know are factors which destroy the confidence of young people in handling stress. Ignoring problems and not looking for solutions allows pressure to accumulate and affects the individual's physical and mental health. Similarly, keeping their problems to themselves may result in a low self-image or self-esteem. Moreover, since they do not seek help from professionals and family members, the suppressed pressure may backfire in the future. This problem therefore deserves attention.

Whether an individual can tackle stress successfully depends largely on one's abilities, the availability of resources and the attitude one takes when facing stress. Teaching young people how to adopt a positive attitude and enhancing their abilities to handle stress and their knowledge in mental health matters deserves further discussion.

**4. Statistics show that an individual's background, including gender, age and financial status, affects the way one deals with stress. This offers an indication of how to resolve stress problems among young people.**

A comparison between male and female respondents shows that men are less likely to "shy away from the problem", "talk to family members" or "divert their attention by shopping and sleeping" when facing stress. On the other hand, women tend to "talk to friends", "release emotions by crying and yelling", "become easily irritated" and "vent their emotions on others" more when having stress than men do.

Emotions from stress fluctuate considerably. Our findings show that women tend to express their stressful feelings outwardly by talking to friends, crying and yelling or telling people off. On the other hand, possibly due to traditional sex stereotypes, men are less likely to show their feelings even when under stress. Therefore, it is worth finding ways to help young men release their stress in an appropriate ways.

In terms of age, we divided our interviewees into three groups to compare how people from three different age groups, i.e. 15 to 19, 20 to 24 and 25 to 29, reacted to stress. Our findings show that the younger the person the less often he / she would "shy away from the problem" or "smoke or drink" when facing stress. Moreover, the younger the person, the less likely he / she would "blame others" or "vent their emotions on others". On the other hand, the younger people tended not to "talk to family members" or "seek help from professionals" when having stress.

According to our statistics, the younger the person, the less likely he / she would seek help from family members or professionals. Both our telephone survey and case studies show that when having stress problems, young people prefer to talk to friends. Although talking to friends can help relieve stress, it may not be an effective way to deal with the problem itself. Attention from families and professionals, on the other hand, can be a more effective way and it is therefore worth discussing how to encourage young people to seek help from family members and professionals.

In terms of financial status, this study divided the interviewees into three groups: students, employees and those waiting to be employed. Our findings show that students are less likely to solve personal problems by "shying away", "ignoring it" or "smoking or drinking". When facing stress, they seldom "talk to family members", "seek help from professionals" or "seek solace from religion". In addition, students are less likely to "blame others" and "vent their emotions on others" and are more likely to relieve pressure by "doing exercises and listening to music".

Our study shows that students tend not to consult family members and professionals when facing stress. This can be a barrier for those who want to help. On the other hand, the fact that students like doing exercises and listening to music to release pressure gives us a starting point for providing help.

The above statistics reveal that gender, age and financial status have an impact on the way young people cope with stress, which gives some indication for providing appropriate assistance.

**5. The HKSAR government currently provides comprehensive mental health care services to young people. It is advisable to set up long-term policies with an emphasis on coordination.**

In Hong Kong, the problems of stress and mental health among our young



people are being dealt with by two governmental departments - the Education and Manpower Bureau and the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau - along with the Hospital Authority and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). At the school level, schools provide counselling services to students in need. For example, the Social Welfare Department, along with some NGOs, had earlier run the "Understanding the Adolescent Project" (UAP) in primary and secondary schools, with an aim to identifying students who could possibly be a risk and thereby rendering timely assistance to them.

On the other hand, medical assessments are used to evaluate the levels of stress or the risk of students suffering from stress committing suicide. The Health Department conducts health assessments through questionnaires at various student health service centres. Students who are identified as being emotionally vulnerable will be referred to psychologists for follow-ups. Moreover, the Health Authority has been promoting education on mental health. "Mindset", a philanthropic initiative set up by the Health InfoWorld of the Hospital Authority and the Jardine Matheson Group, had earlier run the "Health in Mind – Youth Mental Health Promotion Programme" which aimed at boosting the understanding of mental health among our young people.

In addition, the Social Welfare Department has been conducting mental health assessments and providing clinical psychological counselling services to citizens who need assistance. Other NGOs have also been offering counselling services. The Life Education Centre of the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong for example aims to nurture positive life values among the youth; The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups runs "Youthline" which provides a hotline service to young people suffering from emotional distress.

To sum up, Hong Kong has a network of comprehensive mental health services for young people by means of mental health assessments, counselling services and community education. What is worth evaluating is whether there is a need to formulate a clear strategy in the long run, thereby coordinating the services of schools, families, private enterprises and community organizations.

## **6. Drawing upon overseas experiences in making long term strategies in developing mental health services to young people**

Our study has looked at the policies of New Zealand, Australia, the United

Kingdom, Canada and Singapore in the ways they have been promoting mental health education and services. Being at the same level of economic development as Hong Kong, these countries also see their young people living under stress from all aspects of life. The actions of these governments in response to this social phenomenon can thus set examples for the Hong Kong Government.

**a. Clear policy objectives**

All five countries have set up blueprints for developments in promoting national mental health education. New Zealand has set five priorities in its blueprint for enhancing citizens' mental health. The Australian Government's "National Mental Health Development Scheme" has the promotion of community mental health as one of its objectives. In the United Kingdom, documentation on policies specifies precise standards and assessment criteria in promoting national mental health. In fact, the policies in these countries are consistent with clear long-term goals and strategies. As to whether they should be applied to Hong Kong is something we should consider.

**b. The need to build up partnerships in promoting mental health**

All five countries emphasize the importance of cross-sector coordination, whereby various government departments, community organizations, individuals and private enterprises are involved in promoting national mental health. In Australia, different governmental departments coordinate with each other in all dimensions of promoting mental health. In the community of West Carleton in Ontario, Canada, youth groups, businessmen and community organizations exercise together to improve youth mental health. The National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign promoted by the Singaporean Government also encourages cooperation among community organizations, professional groups, the media and private enterprises. Getting people from the society to contribute together is a vital component in successfully promoting community education. In educating the public on the importance of mental health, the involvement of groups from all walks of life must be sought to achieve greater impact.

**c. It all starts with the young people themselves**

Peer influence plays an important role in youth growth. Our study shows that young people prefer to talk to friends when facing stress rather than to professionals.

Therefore, the promotion of mental health for young people should start with that very group. A youth-run organization called Youth Net set up by the Health Promotion Unit in Canada is a good example. Its monthly magazine "Youth Fax" disseminates from a youths' perspective information on the importance of having good mental health. It also organizes activities like Pens & Paint as a constructive channel for young people to lead a balanced life by participating in artistic and cultural activities. In addition, Youth Net helps young people develop problem-solving skills and a positive attitude in response to stress by a series of outdoor activities promoted by a scheme called Freeride.

In a nutshell, the above five countries place the promotion of mental health on a high priority. Not only do they have clear strategies and policies in public education and service provisions, but they also put great effort in to encouraging governmental departments, schools, business enterprises and community groups to work together in achieving these goals. The consideration of a youth perspective and actively involving young people to serve their peers provides good examples for Hong Kong.

## **Recommendations**

- (1) To keep track of the problem: In a highly competitive society, our young people live under considerable stress because of pressure from various sources. If the problem gets ignored or young people lack the abilities to handle this stress, the increased stress levels could have adverse effects on young peoples' mental health. Our study shows that people of different gender, age and financial status perceive and handle stress in different ways. Therefore, we recommend that the Government adopt a systematic approach in understanding the extent of the problem and keeping up-to-date data information so as to identify the young people suffering from stress and render timely and necessary help.**
  
- (2) To consider a long-term strategy with an emphasis on cross-departmental coordination: Our study shows that the stress problem facing our young people nowadays is universal. Although the Government has been providing counselling services and promoting mental health through the work of the**

Hospital Authority, Health Department, Social Welfare Department, Education and Manpower Bureau and other community service organizations, there is a lack of a precise policy strategy. We therefore recommend that the Government draw on overseas experiences in the ways other countries formulate clear policy goals with long-term strategies that are successful in educating the public on the importance of mental health.

(3) To encourage coordination from all dimensions to make deeper impact: Our study shows that youth stress comes from all aspects of life, including self-expectations, parental expectations, expectations on studies and work, friendship and even adaptability at times to economic restructuring. So, a "multi-dimensional" approach is necessary for providing counselling to distressed young people and promoting mental health in the community. The overseas governments in the sample all put emphasis on mobilizing the community when making policies on promoting mental health. We therefore conclude that, on matters dealing with youth stress and promotion of mental health education, the Government should call upon families, schools, private enterprises, community groups and individuals to work together, in addition to the efforts of governmental departments and professional bodies. Such coordination fosters discussions and cooperation across the board on all matters concerning stress relief, stress management, positive thinking and utilization of professional resources.

(4) To encourage youth participation in promoting mental health: Our study shows that a certain level of stress comes from the young people themselves. When facing problems, young people tend to talk to friends and peers, who are seen as more willing to listen because of similarities in age and background. It also shows that discussing with friends is good for stress relief. In our survey, about 30% of young people admit to having difficulties in handling stress. It is therefore necessary to let young people grasp the nature of stress, teach them the

importance of mental health as early as possible and show them ways to cope with stress. We recommend that the Government and community service organizations encourage young people to take part in activities that promote mental health, for example, by asking young people to host promotional programmes and disseminating positive messages concerning stress problems in the "youth" way. The Government should also provide training opportunities to young people so that they can not only handle their own emotional problems better, but also know how to help their peers.