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THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL IMMUNITY IN MODERN ADOLESCENTS: A STUDY ON HEARTBREAK IN TEENAGERS

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

This study was conducted to experientially obtain insights that would allow us to connect psychological immunity and heartbreaks in modern adolescents. The findings from this study have helped throw light on the psychological immunity in modern adolescents and how it changes with no support or different support systems. Interviews were conducted among 12 individuals 6 of whom identify as males, and other females, all in the age margin of 10-19, the age identified by WHO as adolescence.

METHOD

A semi-structured interview format was followed for all participants. The sampling pool consisted of adolescents aged from 10 to 19. A comprehensive study of all the data collected was done.

RESULTS

The inferences suggest that psychological immunity in modern adolescents is not only subjective to their cases but also depends on how socially mature they were beyond their relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

Introverts who already communicated less than normal were observed to be affected the most. A good part of dealing with psychological problems in adolescents was also observed to be manipulated by how their parents were involved. Although in the study there was no tool deployed to measure accurately the psychological immunity, the overall trend was similar and all sampling participants displayed an endeavour to get better, some early, some a while later.

Keywords: Psychological Immunity, Adolescents, heartbreak, coping, qualitative research.

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Introduction

Heraclitus said, “No man ever steps into the same river twice.” We have seen science prove with observations that evolution takes years, hundreds of them to make changes in the human anatomy. Yet we overlook the evolution that matters the most, the evolution; both physical and mental that a human goes through in his long life.

The term “adolescence” was coined by G.S. Hall in the year 1904 when the introduction to adult roles got delayed in children due to changes in schooling and parenting norms. Biologically, adolescence is the period of development starting from the onset of puberty that is marked by many hormonal changes. These hormonal changes often affect human behaviour. The United Nations estimates a global life expectancy of 72.6 for the year 2019. They also state that the part of adolescence lasts for 10-19 years in a human being. That is almost one-seventh of the entire human life.

Adolescent romance can be divided into three wide phases. Romantic life in young adolescents starts as brief relationships during the early adolescence period which then progress into physical or sexual relationships during their mid-adolescence (14-15 years) and into more serious, developed and involving relationships during later adolescence (16-18 years). This framework for the development of romance and love life in adolescents helps them address their image and intimacy needs. Connolly and colleagues propose a framework that divides the romantic life observed in young adolescents to have the four following stages; (1) The Infatuation stage: this is a preliminary stage where there is no engaging relationship. This phase is characterised by intense conclusive feelings about someone.

- (2) Affiliate romantic stage: another pre-relationship stage, consisting of progress in feelings. A couple is not formed, and significant changes get included in decision making for the future of the relationship.
- (3) Intimate stage: a deeper, relationship stage with a mature attitude towards dealing with feelings.
- (4) Committed stage: A deeper state of romance, characterised by a solidified existing relationship, bearing resemblance with the adult mating and house making relationships with mutual commitment. These inferences were drawn from a quite good sampling size yet features differed on the basis of peer context and individuality.

In spite of the short span and lack of intimacy in the relationships in young adolescents, they have reported intense feelings of “love”; firm beliefs of the meaning of “true love” and also confusion and hurt due to “love”. Although these short-lived relationships are mostly unreciprocated and more due to social influence and less due to intimacy, these reportings have a great conclusive impression on the developmental stages of romance in early adolescence. (Young Love: Romantic Concerns and Associated Mental Health Issues among Adolescent Help-Seekers, 2022)

Ignorance mixed with a huge biological overhaul is a formula for chaos and with a lack of guidance or protection, adolescent human beings are very prone to falling into the abyss of intense emotional turmoil. This phase in human life can be both drastically uplifting or a nosedive of mental condition,

both being very case-sensitive conclusions. Some people argue that adolescence is a necessary path that all must tread, for mental strengthening, much like the part where everyone must shed their milk teeth. Others

think it is an unsafe trek and children must be guided through and through for fail-proof ageing that has no damage on the condition of the child, be it mental or physical.

Psychological Immunity:

Psychological immunity consists of a human's ability to protect itself from the deterioration of mental health. The human body is a self-healing machine built to endure and adjust to adapt to the various conditions it might have to face. We have since long known that several environmental phenomena trigger adaptive changes in human anatomy. The human mind is no different, a variety of mental responses have been reported for different circumstances. These changes can be simply psychological or psychosomatic; including small and big changes in the body, changes like oxygen and glucose levels, hormones, and blood pressure. Research conducted over the past 30 years on over 300 people has shown that modern human beings have little to no such responses throughout the majority of their lifetime. This in turn has resulted in increased vulnerability in people of lower ages. Since adolescent minds are still awaiting a deeper comprehensive knowledge about how things work all around the world, it is rhetorical to question why they are the ones most in need of an immune system.

A huge part of biological development in the human body takes place in the adolescence phase. Yet, it is greatly overlooked not only because of the lack of a proper struck of experimenting and evaluation but also because these problems regarding adolescence and people running into such problems do not usually create a visible need of concern and a majority of the society is still unaware of the wide range of problems that may arise from complications in the personal life of adolescents. This can be traced by not only to old ways of parenting but also due to the generation gap between the parents and their children.

A study conducted in 1986 on 159 college students through a four-month-long process had the conclusion that parents were willing to support relationships where involvement of their children. Also, it was observed that "young adults" controlled and regulated the information relayed to their parents and parents responded on the basis of the information thus provided to them. The participants reported when they were contacted after long intervals that their parents tended to support them; although this did not conclusively predict anything about their marital stages. The fact that parents opted to deal with the relationship of their children, proves that they did not only do that as a part of their role to understand and know the personal life of their children but also that they related to it on the basis of a character or socializing trait. (Parental Reactions to Dating Relationships: Do They Make a Difference?, Leigh A. Leslie, Ted L. Huston and Michael P. Johnson, 2022)

COVID: THE GIGANTIC ADVERSARY

As mentioned before, various surrounding conditions can have an equally varied range of mental and biological reactions triggered in humans. We can treat COVID-19 as one such phenomenon that had a similar effect on not only adolescents but on the world as a whole. In the general population, the pandemic had sent a wave of psychological problems like depression, anxiety, stress and frustration as the pandemic slowly grasped the world into its clutches standstill. Not all people were concerned due to medical reasons, but a vast majority of the masses were terrified by the commercial stagnancy and a steady rate of price inflammation that prevailed.

The influence of COVID as an adversary in our research was similar yet of a different context. The participants of the interviews reported having increased communication gaps between them and their partners during the progression of the pandemic. A large fraction of the participants of the convenience sampling asserted that with the lockdown, their scope of communication and socializing; that is spending time together or participating in activities together got lessened. Man cannot survive without socializing, let alone the feelings they nurture for some equally unfortunate human. The participants added that the bridge caused by the blockage of interaction between them and their partners could not be mitigated by social media, especially after already spending the day having to stare at the screen be it for online classes or for studying.

Review of Literature

Being in a good romantic relationship is one of the fundamental components of life which is for most people often more important than any other area (work, material goods, etc.) of life (Campbell et al. 1976). Although it is still to be debated, which age is best for loving, we all sort of already know, that younger humans are always deeper and better in love. This can be attributed to both the fact that they have time to indulge in activities that promote sharing an extensive relationship with someone of the same peer group whilst participating in activities that further strengthen that relationship and also by the fact that the period of adolescence in humans is characterized by huge changes in the way hormones work. This in turn again, gets them into a stage of great emotional confusion. They begin to get exposed to feel they have never felt before and this leads to them seeing everything the world beholds for them in a different way.

Now, as misfortunes come hand in hand with all that's good, with all that young mind space waiting to explore and learn all that the world has in store for them. Sometimes this learning isn't as pleasurable and comes across the hard way. Being in a world where information is just clicked away, no one is really that ignorant to not know what is wrong or right with their relationships. Modern adolescents likewise are quick learners, they realise what to expect and what to not from their surroundings. This is what makes them sensitive about their relationships. They are so convinced by the modern methods of being in love, it gets annoying when anything falls off track.

Especially with the pandemic, interacting and staying in touch might have been especially difficult for people. Not meeting or spending time together with the partners is a huge part of the degrading

mechanism COVID has played in the relationship of these modern adolescents. Now whether COVID has benefited or hindered relationships in India is a different topic altogether. In December 2020, in a survey conducted among men and women between the age of 18-and 35 years, 85% of respondents reported getting to know more about the small and vital things of being in a relationship. Although this survey was not targeted at adolescents, the lower part of the target did include older adolescents. (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1265387/india-opinion-on-love-during-lockdown/>)

Psychological health or psychological immunity is not something we talk about at the dinner table. Especially in India where a vast majority of guardians still follow the ancient norms of parenting, mental health is just another modern gimmick that means nothing. Even till date, there are cases where notice is taken only when there are external outbursts or emotional expressions in children. Often at clinics or hospitals, individuals who belong to the age group of older adolescents make appointments with psychiatrists secretly or without informing their guardians. Awareness needs to be spread among the masses about mental health and it must be also relayed that the mind is also a part of the body and it too, has diseases and cures.

Methodology

We deployed a remote interview as the method for the research. 20 individuals participated in interview sessions that lasted for about 45 minutes. These participants hailed from not only different educational institutions but also from different family backgrounds.

Participants:

All the participants in the remote interview resided in the metropolis and had access to amenities like smartphones, computers and the internet. Most of them were well acquainted with the modern western influences in society. Almost all the individuals were at pace with the modern concepts of being in love. Peer context and influence of modern entertainment had widespread influences on the concept of romance in these adolescents.

Sample Selection:

Purposive sampling was done by tapping into the network of various school and college counsellors as this study will help them approach the issue more comprehensively. Dataset of students who suffered from heartbreak in the past 1 month was shared. These sources were then approached for the study and once they volunteered they became the participants in the study. The age of participants was strictly restricted between 10-and 19 years(Male=10 and Female= 10)Factors like socialization skills and extracurricular activities were taken into consideration.

Procedure:

A questionnaire targeted at drawing insights from the experiences of the participants of the sampling. The questions asked in the questionnaire differed for every individual. External interaction features like social media usage times and preferred mode of communication were also assessed. Participant

selection was semi-randomized. Age filtration was done with the help of forms. Higher age individuals showed more evolved and developed methods of coping with problems and sought proper modes of help faster. Younger participants on the other hand had trouble assessing their own conditions.

Ethical Approval

The present study wholistically considered the ethical aspect basis that the research was of negligible risk, and involved the use of an existing dataset from school counsellors. The respective research asked for voluntary participation along with parents' consent. The participants could leave the study whenever they wished.

Data Analysis:

Data gathered through the interview process was recreated in a tabular form for better assessment. The scale of impact has been divided into three stages numbered 1 to 3, 1 being basic/ mild, 2 being intermediate/ heavy and 3 being the worst; acute/ extreme. The majority of the participants who were young adolescents reported having a stage 2 impact on their psychological conditions with a very little fraction of the participation base reporting the basic level of impact. The deepest and most devastating impact was noticed on individuals with stage 3 impact. This included not only psychological problems but also severe changes in routine and other biological factors like sleep, mood and hunger. The average age of participants in the survey was found to be 16 years. Coping mechanisms and remarks were added after examination of answers received from the questionnaire given to the participants. The data collected through remote interviews and convenience sampling were compared on the basis of the scales of impact and age. Variations in the semi-structured questioning method were taken into consideration and then results were drawn.

| Sl No. | Gender | Age | Scale of Impact | Approach/ Coping Mechanism |
|--------|--------|-----|-----------------|--|
| 1 | M | 13 | 1 | Confusion reported, focussed on school life and studies. |
| 2 | M | 16 | 2 | Confusion reported with major biological symptoms like suffocation and anxiety. Resorted to ill coping measures. |
| 3 | F | 16 | 2 | Reported pain, yet had a learning attitude towards the problem. |
| 4 | M | 19 | 2 | Reported loss of focus in studies, consulted adults for remedy. |
| 5 | F | 17 | 3 | Acute mental and physical symptoms reported, social isolation practised for recovery. |
| 6 | F | 18 | 2 | Moderate biological symptoms reported. Read online and resorted to healthy practices for recovery. |
| 7 | F | 12 | 3 | Biological symptoms like suffocation and heavy chest were reported. Used ill practices for the resort. |
| 8 | M | 15 | 2 | Lowered self-esteem, sought regular recreational activities as a rescue. |
| 9 | M | 13 | 2 | Intermediate mental agonies, no anatomical difficulties reported. Claimed online studies to be a rescue. |

| | | | | |
|----|---|----|---|--|
| 10 | F | 14 | 1 | Concussed at heartbreak, consulted doctors for advice. |
| 11 | F | 17 | 2 | No anatomical symptoms, had difficulty communicating with elders. |
| 12 | F | 18 | 3 | Acute concussion, engulfed in morbid thoughts, took considerable time seeking help. |
| 13 | M | 12 | 2 | Accepted breakup for studies, had a learning attitude and sought help from guardians. |
| 14 | M | 17 | 3 | Anatomical symptoms like stress, and blood pressure fluctuations were reported. Did not consult elders. |
| 15 | M | 16 | 2 | Stress reported, accepted rather quickly, started reading for help. |
| 16 | F | 18 | 2 | Anxiety and stress reported. Started malpractices for help. |
| 17 | F | 19 | 3 | Intensive anatomical symptoms like dark circles and stress were reported. Social isolation is practised as a remedy. Elders took notice. |
| 18 | M | 18 | 2 | Stress reported, primarily self-healed, parents took notice. |
| 19 | F | 14 | 2 | Anxiety reported, lowered confidence reported. Consulted parents. |
| 20 | M | 13 | 1 | Basic mental agony was reported. Sought help from elders, studies worked as a rescue. |

Results

Higher age individuals showed more evolved and developed methods of coping with problems and sought proper modes of help faster. Younger participants on the other hand had trouble assessing their own conditions.

Concept of romance: This study has helped us to obtain inferences that allude to previous studies that indicate that romance/ romantic life in adolescents is a phase of great emotional changes. It not only gives confidence to the person but also helps him develop an image of himself as a partner. In our study, we have found that this image was greatly moved by the peer group impressions and also by all the cultural influences these adolescents had from the urban amenities they could avail themselves like access to the internet, computers, modern western ideologies on romance and unbarred knowledge on almost anything they wanted. Adolescents in our study affirmed feeling true love and felt that socialising with the one they are in a relationship with helps them ease out. ("Romantic Relationships in Adolescence", 2022)

Reaction to heartbreak: The modern adolescents consulted in the study reported having a variety of mixed reactions, both mental and anatomical/ physical as a response to heartbreak. The idea of being in love also varied among participants greatly. Younger participants were more accepting and sought help sooner and reported easier recovery than the older. Also, a lot of individuals reported obtaining easy relief from studies. It was an observation that most of the interviewees used modern methods of entertainment like online video consumption and games for recovery from their condition. An accepting attitude was observed in the younger participants. The older participants too had the attitude of learning/ accepting but this trait appeared to be dominated by their intense mental agony and they took a considerable amount of time seeking help or reaching a stable mental position to ask for help.

Coping Mechanisms: There is no single tool to directly measure how psychologically immune a human being is. Assessment of several factors only helps us to have a conclusive opinion on how psychologically strong/ immune an individual is against psychological turbulence. The emergence of both healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms was observed in the participants. This can be somewhat related to the age and company of various individuals. In a lot of cases, heartbreak was related as a shameful element in sampling participants. They preferred not resorting to cures and chose isolation from socialising. Younger adolescents at school tended more to study and recovered faster and earlier. Older participants had the effect of increased age on their path to recovery. The role of parents also affected the recovery of their children. In a lot of cases, parents taking notice beforehand had benefited the recovery process, often they would be the ones to get the proper help.

Involvement of parents: drawing a conclusive decision on the involvement of parents and its effect on the dealing of the adolescent with heartbreak is hard. This is because a) it is case sensitive and b) parental reactions greatly vary on the external outbursts in their children. Some adolescents who reported lower scales of impact admitted that parents dealt with their situation as something childish or juvenile and drove them to studies as a fixation. Older adolescents and scale 3 impact participants reported getting a more serious approach from their parents. One of the guardians of adolescents mentioned the following about their child; “So, we had to go and buy a printer so he could print out worksheets and stuff for him to do and he painted a lot of furniture. He painted the decking. He did gardening... You know anything just to keep him busy.” These words not only express concern but also indicate the serious approach the parents had to the condition of their child.

Importance/ vitality of a relationship in the adolescents:

The participants had mixed reactions when asked questions like “How did realising that you are no longer in a relationship make you feel?”. Yet all of the answers indicated a sense of loss and dismay. Some more mature participants talked about the inner, moral side of breakups. Younger students were able to take heartbreaks on lighter notes as studies and games, both physical and virtual had drawn them away from the thought of being lovelorn. Here are some of what the participants said that could be related to how important or vital the relationship was to them:

“I kept feeling lonely. The fact that the person I once knew so closely would become entirely someone else to me was very hurting”- (P-14, Age-17)

“The relationship was important, but I had a lot of studies to do and tuitions to attend.”- (P-9 Age-13)

“I couldn’t work or focus on to anything. Ignoring how I felt was really hard. It was specifically hard at night when I tried to sleep. Emptying my head had me all riled up.”- (P-17, Age-19)

Help of socialising with family and friends:

Answers were mixed when samplings were inquired about coping mechanism. Some of the younger adolescents said they did not have a developed sense of coping mechanisms or ways to escape their

conditions. The basic reaction was varied in all the participants, yet they all had a major indication to socialising with friends and parents and focussing on studies. In a lot of cases, parents took quick notice and brought their children to help, whereas in some other cases, the scenario was completely different. Here is what some of the samplings said when asked questions about what helped them get out of the condition they were in:

“I went to the school the following day, closest of my friends knew and they made me better with hangouts and music jams.”- (P-15, Age-16)

“I had my exams soon, going to tuitions with friends and studying with my parents’ supervision didn’t give me a chance to think of other things and that helped.”- (P-19 Age-14)

“I went to school for attendance but I came back home half-healed. I also went out with my friends for a couple of days and that was huge from the drag and it helped me recover.”- (P-17, Age-19)

Role of parents in fighting heartbreaks:

Again, another field with very varied observations; almost every alternate sampling was observant of an opposite kind of reaction. Some parents, as reported by samplings, were reluctant to show interest or validate the problems relating to the personal life of their children. Some, on the other hand, took the physical outburst or sometimes more subtle physical symptoms like lack of appetite and loss of communication very seriously. This can be attributed to the ancient and dated method of parenting a lot of modern “urban” parents still follow. These are some of what the participants said that helped draw a conclusive line to the approach of parents in the heartbreak of their children:

“My parents thought children my age are still kids and they cannot have serious relationships let alone heartbreak.”- (P-20, Age-13)

“I did not want to let my problems have a physical manifestation on my face or body but my parents took notice and wanted to talk.”- (P-12, Age-18)

“My mom knew about my relationship and she also knew when I broke up. She didn’t come to comfort me directly but she cooked me good food and also pep talked me at dinner and other instances.”- (P-19, Age-14)

Discussion

The modern time has young minds in a turbulent state with lesser understanding and more vulnerability. The questionnaire was aimed at drawing a relation between heartbreaks in the said age and how the participants managed to cope with heartbreaks both with and without support systems. This allowed us to get to an inference as to how much strengthened or solidified are modern adolescents when it comes to heartbreaks. Factors like lifestyle, routine, mental nature, activities, leisure, and hobbies were taken into consideration. Analysis of acquired data revealed that expressing

heartbreak to one another was the most painful thing to do, especially when the relationship between two was more open to surrounding people. Coping mechanisms in all the participants were case sensitive yet those mostly revolved around recreational activities like eating, socializing and consuming audio-visual content of sorts.

The interviewees also asserted that consulting friends, family and professionals have proven to be helpful. Some have also reported having a rejective attitude towards their situation and felt like not attending to preventive or rectifying measures while others opined that they wanted to improve their overall mental conditions and were willing to seek remedial procedures. Complications observed resulted in characteristic traits like confidence, self-respect etc. Participants had also reported depreciation in the quality of life. It is apparent that heartbreaks tend to have a heavy toll on the minds of these adolescents and severe impacts like depreciation of the quality of life and lowering in self-esteem.

A fraction of the participants asserted that the pandemic situation prevailing had an adverse effect on relationships. Distances got multiplied and activities like meetings and spending time together got scarce. The lack of social media ability to bridge the gap between a virtual and real-life meeting was observable and had a catalytic effect on the spoiling of conditions between participants and their partners. Among other case sensitive insights, it was also revealed that females adopted progressive methods more often than males. The typical concept of males having to be stronger and must persist through heavy mental stress. This might have caused conditions relating to such cases to worsen. Modern adolescents are more prone to mental conditions arising from heartbreaks firstly due to the gullibility of their young minds and are further worsened by the fact that ancient parenting does not suffice for remedies, especially, when the internet is the basic source of refuge.

Limitations and future recommendations

We have used a semi-structured mode of interview for obtaining data from participants. Again, there is no tool that would allow us to measure the psychological health or immunity in human beings with 100% accuracy so we used a qualitative approach for the collection of data. This method may be considered inaccurate as the results of qualitative research is often different for different candidates. A more systematic tool or method for the collection and analysis of data could have rendered a more accurate result.

The sampling pool was smaller than necessary for performing a study on a topic of this measure. The data collected does allude to other studies made on the topic, yet the study could have used a bigger sampling pool for more accurate observations. One of the major reasons for using a smaller number of participants for sampling is also COVID.

The semi-structured questionnaire was also targeted only at the effects of heartbreak and not their cause or build-up of events. This kind of questioning system could have helped us develop a more comprehensive idea of the coping mechanisms of all the participants in our survey. Some participants

also had difficulty describing their experiences. It is natural as individuals with this trouble were mostly young teenagers.

Conclusion

Despite some of the unavoidable limitations to this study, this provides valuable and unique insights developed on the romantic life and ideologies relating to romance in the modern adolescents in India. We have targeted the study to observe and develop the post-relationship emotional toil on these adolescents and the challenges that come along with a breakup. We were able to draw conclusive insights into the mental health of these adolescents. Collectively, the information gathered from this study has helped highlight the importance of supporting adolescents who are seeking help to recover from heartbreaks in their adolescence and devising methods or procedures to bring them help in the quickest and safest way possible.

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