

Adolescent Anxiety and Depression: A Comprehensive Review and Case Study

By Emily Meng

Author Biography

Emily Meng is a junior at a boarding school in the Northeastern region of the United States with a strong interest in STEM. She is passionate about adolescent mental health and advocates for student wellness.

Abstract

Anxiety and depression are the two most prevalent mental health disorders among adolescents, significantly impacting academic performance, quality of life, and social relationships. These disorders are influenced by various factors, including socioeconomic status, race, gender, and environment. This literature review synthesizes existing research to define and contextualize the prevalence of anxiety and depression in adolescents, examines factors that can exacerbate symptoms, and evaluates therapeutic modalities that can alleviate symptoms. This paper also includes a case study of a boarding high school in the Northeastern region of the United States, assessing its current mental health support systems, identifying their shortcomings, and analyzing qualitative data from student anecdotes to highlight areas for improvement. Several aspects of the literature review are relevant for the specific school context of the case study. This paper concludes that the various therapeutic modalities listed are generally effective in treating anxiety and depression in adolescents and that implementing these interventions in high schools can foster more positive mental health among teenagers, thereby reducing anxiety and depression.

Keywords: anxiety, depression, mental health, adolescents, teenagers, interventions, therapies, treatments, risk factors, exacerbating factors

Introduction

One in three adolescents between ages 13-18 years old experience anxiety disorders (National Institute of Mental Health, 2022). In 2021, one in five adolescents ages 12-17 in the United States had one or more depressive episodes (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021). Anxiety and depression are real and debilitating. These two mental health disorders can profoundly affect many facets of life such as one's ability to develop social relationships, quality of life, school performance, and productivity (Shahbazi et al., 2022). In fact, several studies suggest a strong correlation between these mental disorders and physical health issues such as tuberculosis and cardiovascular disease (Shahbazi et al., 2022). This paper will cover the definitions of anxiety and depression and factors that exacerbate symptoms of these two mental health disorders, offer a case study on the mental health of students at a boarding school in the Northeastern region of the United States and an analysis of its mental health resources, evaluate the efficacy of therapeutic modalities to alleviate symptoms of these two conditions, and provide recommendations based on findings.

Definitions

The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) serves as the standard for the diagnosis of mental health conditions. According to the DSM-5, at least five out of the nine symptoms listed must be present to diagnose someone with major depressive disorder, the most common depressive disorder. These symptoms are depressed mood, reduced interest or pleasure in activities, significant weight changes, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotor disturbances, fatigue, feelings of guilt or thoughts of worthlessness, impaired ability to think or concentrate, and suicidal thoughts (DSM-5, 2013).

The DSM-5 criteria for diagnosing someone with generalized anxiety disorder, the most common type of anxiety disorder, are excessive anxiety and worrying most days for at least six months; difficulty controlling worry; worry associated with 3 or more of

the following symptoms: restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, and sleep disturbance; and impairment in functioning (DSM-5, 2013). The disturbance must not be attributable to the effects of a substance, another medical condition, or another mental disorder (DSM-5, 2013).

Potentially Exacerbating Factors

Certain factors such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, and environment can increase the risk of developing anxiety and depression (Blanco et al., 2014). These factors were selected due to their significant prevalence and impact on adolescent mental health. These factors are also relevant for the case study on a boarding school in the Northeastern region of the United States, where students come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, 55% of the student body is non-white and 40 countries from around the world are represented, 50% of students are females and 50% are males, and academics are rigorous.

Socioeconomic Status

A study of 1088 children and their parents found that children and parents in families with low socioeconomic status experience significantly higher rates of anxiety than those in families with high socioeconomic status (Zhu et al., 2019). Correspondingly, a study on 10,800 individuals investigating the role of socioeconomic status in depression suggests that lower socioeconomic status is associated with higher rates of depression (Freeman et al., 2016). Thus, socioeconomic status plays a role in rates of anxiety and depression, and the large sample size of these studies provides strong evidence.

Race

A study by the University of Alabama at Birmingham of 17,249 individuals from five racial groups: non-Hispanic white, Asian, Hispanic, Afro-Caribbean, and Black found that generalized anxiety disorder was more prevalent among American-born Whites compared to the other racial and ethnic groups in the study (Budhwani et al.,

2015). Similarly, findings from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey III with responses from around 8,120 participants between ages 15 and 40 revealed that rates of major depressive disorder were much greater in Whites than in African Americans and Mexican Americans (Riolo et al., 2011). These findings may seem surprising to some as minority groups are more likely to face discrimination, socioeconomic inequality, and limited access to mental health resources.

Gender

Of the one thousand 15-17 year-old U.S. adolescents in a study on gender and differences in anxiety during adolescence, girls had significantly higher levels of anxiety disorders than boys. These anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, and panic disorder (Ohannessian et al., 2017). Likewise, a critical review by Cambridge University concluded that prevalence of depressive disorders is higher in females than in males (Piccinelli et al., 2018).

Environment

Competitive environments can cause stress, especially when there is high pressure to succeed and a fear of failure. A study of 407 high-school students attending high schools with either highly competitive or non-competitive educational programs found that anxiety levels were significantly higher among students in competitive educational programs (Fülöp et al., 2024). Similarly, another study of 2,235 adolescents found that the more competitive the climate and the greater the trait competitiveness, the higher the levels of depression and anxiety symptoms (Liu et al., 2023).

Methodology

Student anecdotes were gathered during a club meeting on campus, where students shared their thoughts in response to prepared open-ended questions about their experiences with mental health, perceptions of the school's mental health resources, and suggestions for improvement. Additionally, one-on-one interviews were conducted to obtain more in-depth accounts. To protect privacy, student names

remain anonymous, and no personally identifying information is included.

Case Study: A Northeastern United States Boarding School

This boarding high school located in the Northeastern region of the United States is a private co-educational boarding and day school. A majority of students board, and the student body is very diverse, representing 40 countries from around the world. This school is known for its rigorous academic program, vibrant extracurricular offerings, and collaborative learning. As anxiety and depression fall under the category of mental health, with an individual's mental state often serving as indicators of these disorders, this case study examines the mental health of students and highlights the presence or absence of mental health resources available on campus.

Currently, this institution has several mental health resources on campus. The school has therapists on campus, wellness activities every week, and occasional workshops where students can engage with wellness. These workshops range from baking to journaling to circle discussions. Although these initiatives are a great start, and these activities are enjoyable, five students at the club meeting agreed that they wish the school would implement more mental health initiatives that directly address and alleviate stress caused by academic pressures and demanding schedules as such changes would contribute more to long-term improvements in well-being.

Furthermore, all the students present at the club meeting agreed that there aren't as many mental health resources on campus as they would like, and many of the ones that exist do not have a lasting impact. All the students that participated in the case study found that the school's high achieving and fast paced culture makes it hard to balance or prioritize mental health. As one student Class of 2027 puts it, "there is a lot of decision stress. I often am conflicted over whether I should go to a club meeting, ask a teacher questions, or prioritize my mental health. I usually choose the academic or extracurricular-focused option." Another student,

Class of 2026, believes that “it’s not that students don’t value mental health - it’s that they feel they can’t afford to. Mental wellbeing often gets sacrificed in the race to excel academically, secure a spot at a top college, and juggle extracurriculars.” Similarly, another student Class of 2026 has observed that “positive mental health isn’t something students really have time to think about or nurture. Even if you are struggling mentally, the relentless focus on academics and extracurriculars leaves no room to pause. There’s simply no time to prioritize wellbeing.”

Several students believe that initiatives such as allowing walk-ins to see therapists instead of having to schedule appointments, allowing meetings with therapists during advisory, having therapists available on weekends, a wellness pass every trimester, more transparency in grades to alleviate worrying, training teachers on student mental health, more visits from therapy animals, open discussions about mental health, and wellness activities during study hall would greatly enhance the school’s mental health offerings.

Results

Symptoms of depression and anxiety can be alleviated through various therapeutic modalities. Some of these therapeutic modalities include cognitive based therapy, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, art and expressive therapies, animal therapy, and holistic and integrative approaches to wellbeing.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a widely used form of psychotherapy that focuses on identifying and changing negative patterns of thought and behavior. This often involves talking with a therapist to reframe one’s way of thinking. CBT has a structured format with clear goals.

CBT is currently considered the “Gold Standard” of talk therapy, meaning that CBT is considered the best standard in the psychotherapy field at the moment. This is because CBT is the therapy with the most widespread research and has

shown to be consistently more effective than other forms of psychotherapy (David et al., 2018). In fact, a meta-analysis of 144 randomized controlled trials involving around 11,000 patients found that approximately 54% of the trials for depression and around 20% of the trials for anxiety qualified as having a strong comparison group (Cuijpers et al., 2016). This meta-analysis suggests that CBT is efficacious.

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is a mindfulness-based therapeutic modality that combines aspects of CBT with mindfulness practices. It involves mindfulness in which patients pay close attention to the present moment and the identification and challenging of negative thought patterns. Some mindfulness practices involve meditation and breathing exercises, both of which are important practices in MBCT. In essence, MBCT aims to help individuals break patterns of negative thought and cultivate a mind aware of present-moment thoughts and feelings. Thus, this approach can be helpful in managing stress, improving focus, and developing a better relationship with one’s thoughts and emotions.

A study on 30 adolescents who scored high on scales of depression and suicidal ideation found that MBCT led to a significant increase in the life satisfaction, life orientation, and optimism levels of participants. It also found that MBCT led to increased awareness in self, understanding of negative thoughts, and involvement in challenging those negative thoughts. In this study, participants received sixteen MBCT sessions over the course of eight weeks (Raj et al., 2018). As the sample size is small, the results aren’t conclusive but offer valuable insight on the effectiveness of MBCT. Similarly, a systematic review and meta-analysis found that MBCT has proven to be effective in preventing relapse of major depression (Zhang et al., 2022). Thus, MBCT is likely quite effective in treating depression.

Additionally, studies show that MBCT is effective in treating anxiety. A study on 289

college-aged young adults investigating the effectiveness of MBCT on reducing symptoms of anxiety and stress among college students found that MBCT led to reductions in anxiety and stress (Ellison et al., 2024).

Dialectical Behavior Therapy

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), similar to CBT, helps patients recognize negative thought patterns and challenge them. However, DBT also concentrates on developing healthy coping skills, which help people manage their emotions better.

A study conducted by the Islamic Azad University on patients diagnosed with major depression found that the difference between the control group and the group that received DBT was significant, thereby supporting that DBT is effective (Meygoni & Ahadi, 2011). Another study on 40 high school students found that DBT has a significant effect on anxiety and depression (Yravaishi et al., 2020).

Art and Expressive Therapies

Art and Expressive Therapies are another way for people to explore and express their emotions. This can involve writing therapy, art therapy, and music therapy. These expressive therapies can be especially beneficial for people who struggle with communicating their emotions.

Writing Therapy

A study on youth between the ages of 10-18 found that expressive writing tends to produce “small yet significant improvements on adolescents’ well-being” (Travagin et al., 2015). Thus, the evidence is promising but not conclusive.

Another study of 40 individuals between the ages of 16-18 years old concluded that life writing therapy leads to significant reductions in depression of late adolescents (Istiqomah et al., 2018). Life writing includes writing memoirs, biographies, and diary entries.

Art Therapy

A study testing the effectiveness of art therapy on 72 adolescents found that art therapy produced a significant difference in levels of depression and anxiety (Johan et al., 2022). Similarly, six studies on 422 children and adolescents concluded that art therapy led to a significant decrease in symptoms of anxiety (Zhang et al., 2024). Thus, art therapy is likely effective in treating both anxiety and depression in adolescents.

Music Therapy

A study on teenagers using the mailed questionnaire approach found that most participants found music therapy to be effective in coping with anxiety and stress (Sanya, 2021).

Another study on nine adolescents with depression, between the ages of 13 and 17, revealed that short term musical therapy led to decreased severity of depression. This conclusion is promising, yet due to the small sample size, this study does not provide a definitive answer on the effect of musical therapy on depression in adolescents.

Animal Therapy

A study on 33 anxious children ages 5-7 years old found that animal therapy had a significant effect on generalized anxiety disorder. Thus, it concluded that animal therapy is an effective means for reducing anxiety in children (Tahan et al., 2022). Similarly, a study on 44 college students with self-reported depression found that animal therapy was effective in treating depression (Folse et al., 2015). Yet, a systematic review on the effect of animal-assisted therapies on children and adolescents with or at risk for mental health conditions concluded that the majority of findings appeared to be promising, but there is not enough research on animal-assisted therapies to make a definitive conclusion on its effects (Hoagwood et al., 2018).

Holistic and Integrative Approaches

Holistic and Integrative Approaches consider the complete individual and focus on holistic wellbeing, taking into account the mind, body, and spirit. This can involve yoga, mindfulness-based practices, and activities that address physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of health.

One study on the effect of mindfulness on the anxiety and stress of 91 female undergraduate students found that hatha yoga and body scan, two mindfulness-based practices, led to significant reductions in anxiety and stress (Call et al., 2013). Hatha yoga is a specific branch of yoga that is more relaxed and slower paced. It focuses on balancing and joining the body and mind. Body scan is a mindfulness practice that encourages relaxation and awareness by having participants pay close attention to different parts of the body.

Discussion

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

At the boarding school focused on in the case study, therapists often use a CBT-like approach in one-on-one counseling sessions. By introducing ways to reframe one's thoughts, these therapists can help students address negative thought patterns. For example, one student Class of 2026 shared, "one counselor helped me reframe my thoughts on grades. Instead of defining myself by my grades and feeling disappointed when receiving a low grade, she encouraged me to be proud of the hard work I put in and the concepts I mastered." Increasing awareness of therapy on campus and reducing stigma surrounding seeking help through open discussions could encourage more students to talk to therapists.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

On campus, a meditation session is offered nearly every week in the early morning. While this resource is available, the early timing results in limited student participation. Offering additional

meditation sessions in the evenings or during the latter half of lunch could make this resource more accessible, thereby increasing its utilization.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy

As mentioned earlier, therapists available on campus can help students reframe their thoughts. They may also suggest coping strategies to manage emotions. For example, one student from the Class of 2026 shared, "a counselor at school taught me box breathing and progressive muscle relaxation as ways to cope with stress." Thus, by offering workshops with a focus on stress management techniques, a greater number of students can benefit from these strategies.

Art and Expressive Therapies

Writing Therapy

Writing Therapy is not offered consistently on campus. The school can incorporate writing therapy into their current mental health support system by creating events every few weeks that offer a chance for students to journal and write. These sessions can also be offered as wellness activities during study hall, a suggested addition to the school's resources from students.

Art Therapy

Art Therapy is sometimes offered through weekend events such as painting and tote bag making. However, these sessions can be more accessible if offered as wellness activities during study hall.

Music Therapy

Currently, music therapy is not offered as a part of the school's mental health resources. However, there are opportunities for students to engage in music through clubs, talent shows, and performances. While these activities allow for creative expression, they do not provide the therapeutic, structured environment that music therapy offers. As students often experience high levels of stress during exam periods, group music

therapy sessions can be offered. These sessions can also be incorporated into existing programs.

Animal Therapy

Currently, therapy dogs are brought to campus every once in a while. As many students have requested more visitation from therapy animals, bringing in therapy animals more often during exam weeks or during study hall could help alleviate student stress.

Holistic and Integrative Approaches

Some holistic approaches, such as yoga and mindfulness-based practices, are typically offered a few times every month. However, the addition of a wellness pass – an idea suggested by several students – could further enhance the school's mental health offerings. Allowing students to take one day per trimester to focus on self-care, relaxation, or mental health activities would allow students to recharge and will likely reduce stress and increase awareness of the importance of mental health.

Another suggestion from students was to improve transparency in grading by offering more frequent updates on their academic progress to reduce stress and anxiety. Additionally, students suggested implementing mental health training for teachers, which will foster a more supportive environment for students.

Conclusion

Anxiety and depression are widespread and profoundly impactful, especially among adolescents. Factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and environment can increase the risk of developing these two mental health disorders. Symptoms can be reduced through various therapeutic modalities.

The case study on a Northeastern United States boarding school provides insight into what strategies high schools can implement to foster positive mental health among students, especially in high stress and high achieving environments. Findings on the therapeutic modalities described in this paper suggest that their implementation can

enhance the current support structures in high schools. Future research should focus on exploring the effectiveness of these various therapeutic modalities to obtain conclusive results on their effectiveness.

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