



Original Article

Dimensions of teenagers' experiences of loneliness during COVID-19 induced social lockdown: A study in India

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Abstract

Introduction: Indian teenagers, in the age group of 10-19 years, constitute around 22% of the total population in the country. It is a turbulent period in the life cycle of human being and is not unusual to feel lonely occasionally. The COVID-19 lock down compelled the teenagers to face restricted access to socialization, play affecting even their crucial physical development as well as psychological well being. Along with the emergence of pandemic followed by the strict locked down, many teenagers endured with mental health challenges like tension, anxiety and sadness which is a matter of concern.

Method: The qualitative study, conducted during lockdown among teenagers dwelling in the urban, peri-urban and rural settings, aimed at understanding the nature of loneliness teenage children encountered during COVID-19 induced lockdown situation in India.

Results: The results of the study showed that loneliness as a multifactorial experience focused on two key constructs: i) pleasant relation, and ii) sense of aloneness.

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Conclusion: There is immediate need for strengthening school- based interventions inculcating life skills and engaging guardians to orient them on family bonding on the assumption that schooling is not identical to learning, however involves gaining knowledge to inhabit, develop mindset and act for oneself and the common wellbeing in a social space, a social technique. For the purpose, recent National Education Policy 2020 need review.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and movement restrictions led limitations for teenager in getting right of entry to socialization, play, or even sense of touch, that is so essential for his/her psychosocial wellness and improvement. Closure of school observed to prevent children in proper access to learning and interactions with peers. Two of the developmental tasks of teenagers, i.e. expanded social skills and empathy and individual identity show up via interactions with friends. Teenager may additionally sense burdened and at loss with the cutting-edge situation, leading to frustration and anxiety, which may effectuate to handiest growth with the overexposure to mass and social media. Occasionally a few adults may additionally battle to find ways to explain and communicate with teenagers about the existent situation in a manner that is understandable to them.

For teenage children, it is natural to sense strain, tension, grief, and fear all through an ongoing pandemic like COVID-19. Fear and tension about their personal health as well as well being of loved ones often overwhelm them and cause strong feelings. In the current digital world, teenage children additionally get entry to different kinds of information and news through social media and digital structures, many of which may not be authentic, inflict on them additional strain and anxiety. The situation tends to become all the more acute for them, when teenagers are unable to go out, play, attend school or engage freely. For teenager and their families in quarantine or isolation condition, there can be accelerated threat of violence and abuse, including gender-based and other varieties of violence infliction on teenagers. There will be fallout from this for a long time to come. Teenagers, who feel helpless, tend to face more difficulties and may hence require more care and

consideration. A portion of these kids need solid emotionally supportive networks and passionate references. The dread and stress brought about by corona virus may expand their feeling of frailty and cause significantly more genuine mental issues. The country is already facing notable health and educational disparities along socioeconomic and religious-caste-racial lines, and the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to exacerbate them with a conscious effort to address the multitude of issues.

Indian teenage population constitute around 22% of the total country's population (Census of India, 2011). In the defined age range of 10-19 years for teenage or adolescence (WHO, 2005), it is not phenomenal for them to feel forlorn discontinuously (more than 66% teenagers report encountering depression once in a while) as it is considered a tumultuous time. The persistent and painful feelings of loneliness for some adolescents (Heinrich et al., 2006) as described by 15-9% respondents; described by a profound feeling of social disconnection, vacancy, uselessness and absence of control (Vander et al., 2011), may manifests to become a debilitating psychological condition. Forced home stay for teenagers can cause prolonged loneliness. The same can possibly get persistent during pre-adulthood time frame, when social turn of events and personality arrangement become generally remarkable (Erikson, 1995). The focus of adolescent development is the need for more noteworthy autonomy, fundamentally through closer binds with companions and friend gatherings (Chipuer et al., 2000). But this change is inseparably connected with the danger of 'expanded sensations of partition and weakness to passionate and social depression' (Brennan, 1982). For instance, adolescence is when disrupted depression may grow neurotically (Miller et al., 2010, Asher and Paquette, 2003; Glaanaki et al., 2008) furthermore, "look like

a suffering character oddity” (Neto and Barros, 2000). Loneliness is seen by certain specialists to be a unidimensional develop: one element that is same for all which is the equivalent for everybody across conditions and causes, and quantifiable utilizing a solitary scale (Asher & Wheeler, 1985; Russel et al., 1996; Russel, 1996). Some researchers observed that loneliness is one entity that is same for all through the circumstances and causes, and measured using single scale. However, Weiss (1973) proposing one of the earliest multidimensional models, and others following suit. Goossens et al. (2009) articulated that empirical advances are valuable in the conceptualization and measurement of loneliness, but it has been observed that subjective exploration can give wise account to help clarify exact perceptions (Perlesz and Lindsay, 2003). What is more, it is capable of achieving an exact comprehension of finding out about how individuals comprehend their social and material circumstance, incident, points of view and history (Ritchie et al., 2013). This qualitative study aimed at exploring the nature of loneliness teenage children encountered during COVID-19 induced social lockdown in India. Interviews, semi-structured in nature allowed for a rich and top to bottom discourse on the everyday encounters of dejection, weaknesses to forlornness and the changeability of perception and experiences of loneliness among teenage students.

Methodology

Participants and setting: The study were conducted during mid-April and May 2020 among teenagers of whom 76.2% were dwelling in the urban, and 52.4% in peri-urban and rural localities. Altogether 63 participants from 11 states, comprising of all zones, consisting 44.4% female and 55.6% male. Of the participants, 61.9% were school-going early teenage and 38.1% late

teenage students, 47.6% studying in government and 52.4% in private schools, participated as depicted in tabular form. Respondents were conveniently selected with their guardian's consent and children assent availed verbally to participate in the over-the-telephone conference calls. The study was conducted remotely.

Interview protocol: The study adopted phenomenology approach and semi-structured interview schedule was developed through literature review (Asher et al., 2003; Weiss, 1973; Parker et al., 1996). We embarked at understanding, with the end goal, the points of view and wants of young children of feeling alone, being distant from everyone else, and what these terms intended to them, questions were outlined appropriately (Parker and Asher, 1993). Piloting with five children (aged between 10 and 19 years), prior to the interviews, was done to evaluate the suitability of a question and the appropriateness of a topic. Three broad sections are integrated into the final interview protocol: 1) friendship, 2) alienation, and 3) loneliness. Section 1, inquiries regarding friendly relationship, gatherings of companions, development among companions and fellowship gatherings, the significance of camaraderie in their lives, and exercises they occupied with their companions.

To limit any conceivable antagonistic effect on individuals, with no or few companions, we used carefully worded prompts relating to friendships. In Section 2, questions on Aloneness and their emotions when alone, and preferring to be alone were asked. Loneliness included questions, in section 3, on contrasts between being distant from everyone else and forlorn, how much lonely they felt, strategy they used to soothe the feeling of loneliness, the cause of loneliness, and identifying and help others who were

seemingly alone. Through informal conversational exchanges, specific methods applied included being friendly and personable, providing adaptable articulations to help manage members through the meeting, and giving infrequent proportional details. Various endeavors have been made to encourage simplicity of correspondence with planned interviewees before starting telephone calls. Each interview lasted for 45-60 minutes.

Data collection: The virtual communication-based study was done with the initial sharing of the study objectives with guardian and

teenage children including availing their permission for audio-recording; and sharing the take for their final agreement post-interaction. Interviews were conducted over telephone either one-to-one individual or tele-conference system for group interactions.

Data analysis: The interactions, audio-taped, were later transcribed and analyzed. Transcripts were analyzed through QAD MINAR software and codes were generated. Recurrent themes were identified with further examination of data for nuances, similarities and differences. The descriptive profile of respondents is given in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Demographic details of study participants

Indicators	Particulars	Percentage
1. Age Profile	10-14 years	61.9%
	15-19 years	38.1%
2. School Category	Government	47.6%
	Private	52.4%
3. Gender profile	Female Student	44.4%
	Male Student	55.6%
4. Demographic Profile	Urban	76.2%
	Peri-Urban	23.8%

5. Representation			
State	Female Student	Male student	Total
Kerala	50.0%	50.0%	6
Andhra Pradesh	60.0%	40.0%	5
Rajasthan	44.4%	55.6%	9
Gujarat	60.0%	40.0%	5
Uttar Pradesh	16.7%	83.3%	6
Delhi	71.4%	28.6%	7
Madhya Pradesh	40.0%	60.0%	5
Assam	66.7%	33.3%	3
Meghalaya	60.0%	40.0%	5
Manipur	40.0%	60.0%	5
West Bengal	0.0%	100.0%	7

Results

The study results identified Loneliness encountering as interwoven and centered on two fundamental builds: 1) companions' association, and 2) perceived loneliness. Subjective bits of knowledge uphold the idea of young children 'situated' on continuums inside these two builds; 1) neighborliness with associated and separated anchors, and 2) felt alienation - with positive and pessimistic anchors.

Friendships- Reconnect with friends at school tend to hold a strong relation to their feelings of loneliness. "Friends are important as they give me a feeling that they are always there for me, whenever I need them"- said 14-year old boy studying in a private school in Ahmedabad. One 11 -year old of Kerala girl stated, "Friends are my social life-line, and I miss their physical presence though I am talking to them over phone these days frequently" Another 18-year old boy from Kolkata living in a joint family with siblings asserted, "For me, daily interactions with friends in person about personal issues are what I am missing now during the forced stay at home- not a good idea to chat on the phone, as my cousins may be curious". These statements highlight that friendship and social ties were important for emotional well being and supporting of social friends in preventing feeling of loneliness. Despite being online on social media platform, most of them are stressed about problems maintaining physical distance with friends during the epidemic situation. In this study, however, few teenagers expressed deep sensations of separation and disconnection from peers. Unmistakably the nonappearance of good school companions was extremely troublesome and agonizing for these kids, just as being related with sensations of misery. A 13 -year old girl student of an English medium school in Delhi said, "my school mates are not best of my friends, even

though we are in talking terms in school. But beyond the school hours I keep them blocked". Another 12-year girl studying in a corporation run open school in Jaipur stated, "I am missing meeting my friends during this lockdown as I don't have a cell phone to remain connected with friends during the stay home situation".

It was observable during the interviews that absence of friendly companionship and coming about aloneness had an antagonistic expanding influence on these young people's lives. The contrasting effect of friendship is illustrated by the following: a physically challenged male student integrated in a government school with normal students said, "I cannot participate in outdoor activities as my school friends, I can observe them pitying me- very painful for me". A single mother's boy in middle school standard said, "I keep myself aloof from meeting fellow students and peers, lest they ask me about my parentage. Constant fear of being asked about it by friends haunts me".

Aloneness- Although 70 per cent of the respondents had the capability to depict the advantages of being separated from everyone, some additionally communicated negative sentiments about being separated from everyone else. To many teenagers, in urban areas particular, views of aloneness also was observed to be situational. "I was whispering a nasty joke with my friends at the class, the teacher somehow overheard it. I was made to stand outside the class holding my ears for the whole class-period. I felt as if ostracized" said a peri-urban 18-year boy from Meghalaya. The comment tends to indicate that it was considered problematic to be pulled up in school in front of fellow school mates and co-located with ostracism, humiliation or frustration, while such punishment at home did not result in such feeling. Many positive things about spending

time alone were mentioned by participants, including: charging up, relaxing and enjoying peace; give room; allowing opportunity to pick their own activities and getting individual space. A 19-year old boy from Miyapur City said, "It is great to have companions and everything, except here and there I simply need my very own space- that is now available to me". Another 17-year Lucknow girl added, "I prefer to be myself when have personal problems, and now the forced stay at home helps me to sort out personal issues all by myself". While teenagers generally accepted and welcomed being alone as an occasional circumstance, few of them, especially those in primary and grade schools, battled to discover positive viewpoints or advantages with being distant from everyone else. Indeed, when asked how they hang around alone, a large part of the appropriate responses gave by early teenage students and some middle-school students were friends or family members' issues. According to a 11-year girl of south Delhi slum, the regular lousy episodes at home over her drunkard father, forced her to hide in a corner with her younger brother. She said, "I feel upset witnessing those, being confined at home". A significant determinant of how the teenager understood being alone was the setting in which one was alone.

While many participants seemed able to understand differences between loneliness and being alone during forced home stay, it was more difficult for those who expressed friendship issues to recognize two or independently characterize each insight to recognize two or independently characterize each insight. It was seen as 'the same' for a little loneliness and being alone. A few members additionally communicated negative feelings, for example, feeling discouraged or awful when they were distant from everyone else. "When mummy is busy in kitchen or else work-from-home and papa

busy in his computer maximum time of the day, I feel extremely lonely and depressed at not being able to interact them" said a 14-year old single girl teenager of Assam. The same feelings expressed by a 12-year old single male teenager of Surat, whose both parents were engrossed in trading over the telephone during the lockdown period, who said. "I feel really distressed when all alone and bored with surfing the mobile internet". These assertions propose that negative feeling about being separated from everyone else appeared to be connected to the recurrence of compulsory aloneness, such as working guardian away from home, no kin at home, or being not able to associate with companions. Loss of the capacity to know how to occupy and entertain oneself results in emptiness. For example, suddenly confronted with more unstructured time than teenage students were used to, a class eight female student of peri-urban Rajasthan and a seventh grader residential male student from rural West Bengal expressed clear boredom with extended unscheduled 'vacation' from school. Thus, it is understandable that with the emotions of isolation in teens during the coronavirus epidemic time, symptoms of depression may emerge.

Discussion

Loneliness is hard to control in an experimental setting for both practical and ethical reasons. For researchers trying to differentiate between the causes and consequences of isolation, it has posed a challenge. Our examination shows that disconnection is multidimensional and is impacted both by presence of significant friendships (or not) and by how teenagers frame and feel being alone. In particular, for teenagers, being separated from everyone else can have both positive and negative affiliations, and by all accounts impacts by the setting and recurrence of being separated from everyone else. Aloneness can be

supported by organizations of fellowship, and experienced all the more adversely when there has been an absence of friendship and social interaction. It was apparent in this study that it was particularly difficult for teenagers to feel disconnected of peers and to perceive a lack of friendship. Teenagers, who endure both an absence of agreeable association and pessimistic forlornness, appear to be at specific danger of more unfortunate mental prosperity. While the fellowship issues of teenagers add to feeling desolate, these discoveries uphold the reason recently recognized that good aloneness (otherwise called loneliness) is likewise a significant factor in the dejection develop (Goosens et al., 2009; Houghton et al., 2014). Learning and thinking assists with comprehension and take advantage of timeframes alone, and an inspirational mentality to dejection encourages solid enthusiastic advancement during adolescence and juvenile (Buchholz & Chinlund, 1994). Teenagers regularly look for time alone to reflect and unwind, to develop themselves and to manage enthusiastic pressures, that too reflects emotional maturation (Galanaki 2004). Although a large proportion of adolescent expressed positive aspects of loneliness, some participants stated negative attitudes regarding time alone. The study on clinical significance of loneliness (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006) demonstrated that students with a particularly negative disposition towards dejection may create negative feelings about themselves, consider others to be less dependable and steady, and lose desire to modify their 'secluded' quandary. For certain youngsters, investing energy alone could be a particularly negative experience, probably because it provides them with time to ruminate about things which are negative and cause anxiety. Another study conducted by Clark & Beck (2010) featured that negative examples of reasoning may add to the pathology of

tension; in this way, systems that forestall the rise of negative perspectives to depression are probably going to be gainful for teenagers' future psychological well-being. Theoretical remarks on loneliness have been given by several psychologists and sociologists over the years. Our qualitative study findings have important implications because in creating focused on procedures and ways to deal with forestall and decrease loneliness, they give suggestions and bearing to healthcare professionals, instructors, and policy makers. Focused counselling, for example, in which behavior is driven by cognitive reinforcement strategies (Durlak et al., 1991), may help teenagers who are detached, battle to take part in solid fellowships and companion gatherings, or endure unfriendly aloneness. These results of the study also have ramifications for policy as well. For instance, while most of the shuttered schools in India have begun online classes for their students, there are still vast number of children left out in the cold. This creates a huge barrier during this lockdown for students (especially in rural areas) to access online education. As the academic year advances, as classes proceed online, these unconnected students slip further behind their connected peers. The 4G speeds may not be accessible even to those with internet connections.

Limitations

Our study had certain limitations as the sample for this study comprised a relatively small number of teenager students, conveniently sampled, from few representative states that could be accessed. Their opinions may not truly reflect the opinion of teenagers in general. Again, the medium of data collection, over telephone, may be a subject of academic inquiry by methodologist. But in the context of accessing the geographically dispersed teenagers in a lockdown situation, when face-to-face interaction is not possible,

the structurally-distanced interview hold potential in eliciting open-ended data to validate the findings. Only a small percentage of the respondents felt recurrent loneliness in our sample; this may be due to the hesitation of lonely teenagers to share their thoughts in such a study. The likely buffering of forlornness made by solid family associations and connections is still not examined. Also, it is recognized that the subjectivity has been checked by every one of the five authors, interviews were done by all, consultation and cross-checking by two authors during data analysis.

Conclusion

The result of the current investigation features the multidimensional idea of loneliness, and recommend that a scope of systems for creating intercessions might help overcome teenage loneliness. Taking lessons from pandemic scenario, the suggestive way forward is to consider strengthening school-based interventions with focus on life skills development among students, and periodically orienting guardians on strengthening family bonding. Such measures will help the teenagers maintain better friendship and also positive attitudes toward loneliness. Education continuity is one of the broadest initiatives to enhance the resilience and well-being of children and reduce anxiety during an emergency. However, not all children will need individualized mental health support; and those few who might need can be assisted through counselling system introduced in schools. Ensuring the continuity of quality and effective education, without deprivation of equal access and other basic social services, is crucial for majority of children to help them adjust to a new normal. The 'New Education Policy-2020' announced seems to focus on developing the future of education in India; bridging the 'know that' and 'know how' focus gap. Presumably it should benefit

through fortifying of the standardizing system of the 'Right to Education Act' access to diversity of language; students' proper access to digital systems, adequate resilient school infrastructure; and, most importantly-participation of local authorities and members with the goal that youngsters coming from weak families, especially SC/STs, religious minority and girls are not left out. Corona virus instructed us how tutoring is not comparable to simply learning; however, incorporates a social space, a social cycle, to figure out how to live, think and represent one's self and the aggregate great.

Ethical considerations

As the participants were minor, details regarding purpose, nature and topics for unstructured discussion were shared with the guardians with emphasis on the voluntary nature of participation of children with their individual identity remaining undisclosed and their right to withdraw from the interaction process without any coercing. The major focus has been on the fact that the remote interactions was to take place at the convenient time of the adolescent participants and in presence of the guardians at their home. The guardians thus, in having full knowledge of the study processes, gave assent with given time slot for the telephonic interview through e-mail or SMS for the interview to happen. The interviewers, on their part, shared the take after each interview with participants, and their final nod for the ultimate take. The study followed ICMR Guidelines (2017- 5.5) suitably.

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