

Psychological Characteristics Of The Emergence Of Stress, Depression, And Role Confusion In Adolescents

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Abstract

This article analyzes the psychological characteristics of adolescence, the biological, psychological, and social factors of school-related stress, Erik Erikson's stage of "identity vs. role confusion," identity statuses according to Marcia's theory, as well as the main forms of behavioral disorders observed in adolescents based on scientific sources.

Keywords: Adolescent, factors, stress, emotion, depression, behavior, development

Introduction

Adolescence is widely recognized as a critical developmental period characterized by rapid biological, cognitive, emotional, and social transformations. It represents a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, during which individuals undergo profound restructuring of identity, behavior, and psychological functioning. According to Steinberg (2014), adolescence is not only a period of maturation but also a phase of heightened vulnerability and opportunity, where developmental trajectories can significantly influence lifelong mental health outcomes.

From a neurodevelopmental perspective, adolescence is marked by pubertal hormonal changes, ongoing maturation of the central nervous system, and particularly delayed development of the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for executive functions such as decision-making, impulse control, and long-term planning (Blakemore, 2018). At the same time, subcortical regions, especially the limbic system, show heightened reactivity, leading to increased emotional sensitivity and reward-seeking behavior.

Identity formation is another central psychological task of adolescence. Erikson (1968) emphasized that individuals at this stage actively explore fundamental questions such as "Who am I?" and "What is my future role in society?". Successful resolution of this crisis leads to identity achievement, while failure may result in role confusion and psychological instability.

Furthermore, the biopsychosocial model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding adolescent development. It highlights the interaction between biological maturation, psychological regulation, and social environmental factors. School pressure, family dynamics, and peer relationships collectively shape adolescent stress responses and behavioral outcomes.

Methods

This study is based on a theoretical and integrative literature review approach. A wide range of peer-reviewed scientific publications, developmental psychology theories, and neuropsychological studies were analyzed to explore the psychological characteristics of adolescence, stress mechanisms, and identity formation processes. Key theoretical frameworks included Erikson's psychosocial development theory, Marcia's identity status model, and contemporary neurodevelopmental research by Steinberg, Blakemore, and colleagues. Empirical findings related to stress physiology, hormonal regulation, and adolescent mental health outcomes were also reviewed.

The collected data were synthesized using qualitative content analysis. The aim was to identify recurring psychological patterns, biological mechanisms, and environmental influences that contribute to adolescent behavior and mental health outcomes. Particular attention was given to school-related stressors and their psychological consequences.

Results

The analysis reveals that adolescent psychological development is influenced by a complex interaction of neurobiological, hormonal, cognitive, and social factors.

Neurobiological Development

One of the most significant findings is the developmental imbalance between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system. While the limbic system matures earlier and drives emotional and reward-related behavior, the prefrontal cortex—responsible for self-regulation and executive control—continues developing into early adulthood (Casey, 2015). This imbalance contributes to increased impulsivity, sensation-seeking behavior, and risk-taking tendencies during adolescence.

Hormonal and Emotional Changes

Pubertal development triggers significant hormonal fluctuations, including changes in cortisol, testosterone, and estrogen levels. These hormonal shifts are strongly associated with emotional instability, mood swings, and increased stress sensitivity (Dahl & Gunnar, 2009). As a result, adolescents often experience heightened emotional reactivity compared to children and adults.

Identity Formation

According to Marcia's identity status model, adolescents progress through four identity statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement (Marcia, 1980). Research indicates that individuals in the moratorium stage—characterized by active exploration—tend to demonstrate higher psychological flexibility and better long-term psychosocial outcomes (Kroger, 2017).

Peer Influence

Peer relationships play a crucial role in shaping adolescent behavior. Studies show that peer influence can account for approximately 40–60% of behavioral variability during adolescence (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). While positive peer influence encourages prosocial behavior, academic engagement, and extracurricular involvement, negative peer influence may increase aggression, substance use, and risky behaviors.

School-Related Stress

School stress can be categorized into three major types:

- Academic stress (exams, grading pressure, high expectations)
 - Social stress (bullying, peer rejection, social isolation)
 - Organizational stress (school rules, workload, teacher interactions)
- (Moksnes & Espnes, 2016; Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Kaplan et al., 2019)

Chronic exposure to these stressors activates the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, leading to prolonged cortisol secretion. Elevated cortisol levels negatively affect sleep patterns, attention, memory, and emotional stability (McEwen, 2006). Long-term stress exposure has also been associated with structural and functional brain changes, including amygdala hyperactivity and reduced prefrontal cortex efficiency (Tottenham, 2015).

As a result, adolescents exposed to persistent stress frequently exhibit:

- depressive symptoms
- generalized anxiety
- sleep disturbances
- low self-esteem
- academic burnout

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight adolescence as a highly sensitive developmental stage in which biological maturation and psychological regulation are not fully synchronized. This mismatch between emotional reactivity and cognitive control significantly increases vulnerability to impulsive behavior and emotional instability.

Social context plays an equally important role. Peer groups, school environments, and family support systems function as critical moderating factors that either buffer or intensify psychological stress. Positive social support has been shown to enhance resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms, while negative environments contribute to psychological distress and behavioral problems.

Moreover, chronic stress during adolescence may have long-term implications for mental health. Continuous activation of stress-response systems not only affects emotional well-being but may also alter brain development trajectories. This emphasizes the importance of early psychological intervention and school-based mental health programs.

Preventive strategies should therefore focus on strengthening emotional regulation skills, improving school climate, and enhancing family involvement. Integrative support systems can significantly reduce the prevalence of anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders among adolescents.

Conclusion

Adolescence is a complex developmental stage characterized by intense biological, psychological, and social changes. Stress and depressive symptoms during this period are strongly influenced by school environment, peer relationships, and family support systems.

The study confirms that adolescent mental health is the result of dynamic interactions between neurobiological development and environmental factors. Strengthening psychosocial support systems is essential for promoting healthy psychological development and ensuring long-term well-being.

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