

Review Paper

Emotional Experience in Iranian Adolescents During COVID-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Study



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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to analyze the lived emotional experience of adolescents during the prevalence of COVID-19 and quarantine. The research method was phenomenological qualitative. To achieve information saturation, 25 adolescents aged 15-17 years were purposefully selected and responded to the research tool which was a semi-structured interview individually and online. After analyzing the six main themes of boredom, loneliness, homesickness, helplessness, stress, anger, and fear of judgment were extracted from the available data. The results of the present study are consistent with empirical evidence showing that although restrictions on quarantine are unavoidable, facilitating conditions to meet mental needs and maintain mental health, such as creating interpersonal relationships and supporting adolescents in critical situations, should be considered by healthcare providers, trainers, and parents.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a serious threat to mental health. After the spread of corona, people's anxiety levels increased with the release of news about the pandemic and the increase in infected cases [1]. During this period, a leap trend was observed in psychological problems, including depression and anxiety [2]. The pandemic was an acute stressor. Perceived stress of corona [3] has been seen in many people. Perceived stress is a general mental assessment of the level of stress that people experience about an event and the mental assessment of its damage. Stressor assessment is when people have no control over the problem and their resources are insufficient to engage with challenges, which leads to emotional distress such as anxiety [4, 5] or post-traumatic stress disorder accident [6]. One of the causes of these unfortunate physical and mental conditions is the fatigue of monotony along with the constant and negative presence of COVID-19, which has depleted people all over the world of energy, inspiration, motivation for work, family, and even life, and left some people with a feeling of deep desperation and despair [7]. A significant part of these effects was created following the quarantine [8, 9]. In addition, with each death, the relatives were emotionally affected [10-12]. These emotions are accompanied by constant anxiety and the need to be alert. The energy required to stay alert in front of an invisible threat is exhausting [13-15]. Being alert can also take the form of new and unknown adaptations such as following quarantine requirements [7]. The role of the family has also been investigated as an effective factor in enduring quarantine [16, 8].

Adolescents were among the groups that were affected several times by the COVID-19 pandemic, threats to themselves and their families, school closures, the necessity of online education, a long period of social distancing, and the challenge and apprehension of returning to face-to-face education in schools [17]. Research shows that the concern about the safety of food, the interruption created in students' skills in subjects such as math, family problems, the lack of proper family relationships, and the uncertain and dangerous state of public places are new realities [18]. Many teenagers reported that their problems included feeling bored (71%), losing friends (54%), lack of academic motivation (60%), and lack of interest in current social isolation (57%) [19]. Several students mentioned perceived fatigue while listening to online lectures. Among many, basic learning problems were attributed to a lack of interaction with classmates. This last case, in turn, is one

of the most fundamental factors causing emotional and psychological distress [20]. Social isolation, loneliness, and changes in daily habits as direct consequences of quarantine were risk factors associated with the onset of various disorders such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and potentially long-term effects on brain function [13, 21]. Finally, in the research conducted by Kohls et al. [22], it was found that due to the spread of corona, young people were seriously deprived of their daily social life and many social experiences, which in turn are essential for a sense of belonging, perceived competence, and autonomy. The lack of these important components of self-determination can lead to a decrease in emotional well-being [23]. According to what is related to the effect of corona on emotional components, emotional well-being, and the challenges of education during the COVID-19 pandemic mentioned, the present study seeks to investigate and describe the emotional experience of a group of teenagers from corona and virtual education.

2. Materials and Methods

According to the purpose of the present study, this study is qualitative research with a descriptive phenomenological procedure. The phenomenology method simply expresses how participants experience and give meaning to a certain phenomenon [24, 25]. The stages of the research were familiarizing with the data and initial reading, identifying crucial points and creating initial codes, searching for themes, defining themes and sub-themes, and finally, writing a report [26]. First, the text of each interview was read word by word, and initial codes were noted in the margin of the text. Then, by extracting the primary codes, similar codes were placed next to each other, codes with different experiences were distinguished from each other, and semantic clusters were formed based on these statements in the form of themes. Finally, eight themes related to emotional experiences were obtained. The statistical population of the present study included all the students of district 4 of Tehran City, Iran, and the statistical sample included 25 adolescents in the age range of 15-17 years old in the second secondary school, who were selected by purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria included receiving virtual education through the LMS system, complying with quarantine conditions, and reducing face-to-face social communication. The students who benefited from face-to-face individual education (private class) or attended gatherings were excluded from the present study.

Data collection tool

Data were collected according to the phenomenological research method via semi-structured interviews. These interviews are suitable for qualitative research due to their flexibility and depth [26]. The researchers of the current study developed the interview protocol with adolescents by considering the research background of emotional, motivational, and cognitive experiences of adolescents during COVID-19. The protocol questions were:

What emotions do you experience during the quarantine period?

What are these emotions like?

How do you react to these emotions?

Do you talk about these situations with anyone? Why?

What has been the reaction of others to your feelings?

What would you change if you could?

Before starting the main interview process, three preliminary interviews were conducted to modify the questions. In this research, the interviews were conducted online due to limitations, and after information saturation, the interviews were stopped and the following measures were taken to evaluate the data.

1- The supervision of a person with qualitative research experience was used in all stages of the research.

2- Another person with experience in qualitative research and familiar with the concern of the research idea (emotional experiences of adolescents) was asked for help to check the codes and classes extracted from the text of the interviews.

3- By informing several participants of the extracted conceptual classes and applying their opinions in the final description, the extracted themes and sub-themes were validated.

4- In the final report, verbal samples of the participants were stated.

3. Results

In this section, the textual analysis of the interviews was done. According to the purposive effort of the researchers to control the type of education received and observe the quarantine conditions by the adolescents, the textual

analysis showed that the emotional experiences of the adolescents were mainly based on the understanding of emotions such as boredom, fatigue, and helplessness. Also, the focus of the interviewees in tracing the paths was focused on the search for denial procedures. In other words, the analysis of the responses showed that adolescents, while experiencing the inhibiting emotions of boredom, and anger due to the lack of control over the conditions, choose inefficient ways such as denying the experienced emotion to regulate and manage the conditions. The researchers found that emotional experiences form the origin of referring to the most incompatible aspects of responding to the demands of academic environments. The results of the present study emphasized that people were faced with different emotions such as fatigue, boredom, frustration, stress and anxiety, helplessness, fear of being judged, and homesickness. The results of these emotions strengthen the possibility of getting stuck in a cycle of more intense and unpleasant emotional experiences [27, 28]. Predicting the behavioral patterns of adolescents depends on their various emotional experiences and these experiences are directly fed by the special characteristics of the social environment. In other words, emotions mediate the interrelationship of control, perceived value, and motivation [27, 28]. Experiencing such emotions will lead to the experience of anger while reducing the psychological well-being of adolescents. The main themes of the emotional experience of adolescents were as follows (Figure 1):

Boredom: In expressing the experience of the participants' boredom, they referred to their feelings by saying things like "I'm like a fish in a small bowl that is limited and wandering in the same small place, it's very boring, we have nothing pleasant to do" and "I ask myself why this situation is not finished, I tell myself every day when COVID-19 will end, I'm tired, I want to get rid of this boring situation." This feeling is best experienced in the phrase "repetition of consecutive days without the slightest change."

Helplessness: In contrast, the emotional experience of helplessness was perceived by the participants with phrases like "it's like you're stuck in a period and the more you try, the situation gets better but it doesn't," "I became like a person who tries all possible ways to change his situation and it is ineffective."

Loneliness and Homesickness: The following expressions were representative of this feeling: "I can't cope with this way because I have become lonely day by day," "If you don't have the taste of having anyone by your side for a while, even your friends, you will miss a lot"

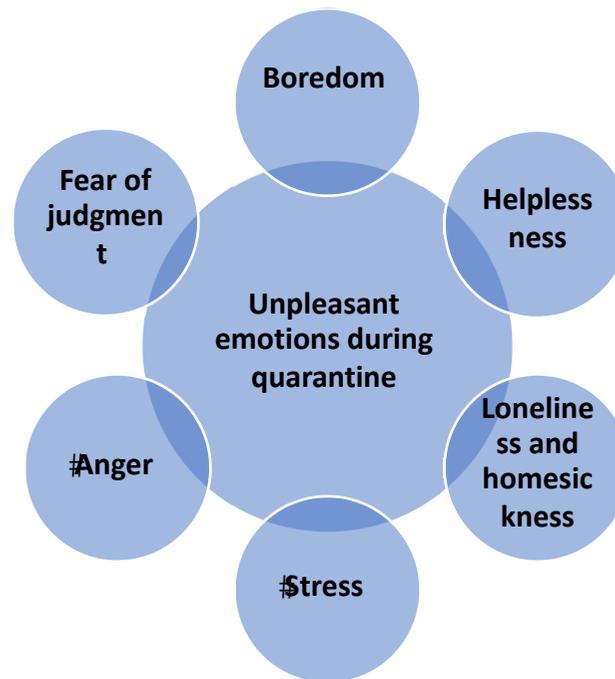


Figure 1. The basic themes resulting from the emotional experiences of adolescents during the quarantine period

and “I feel I become like a person who asked everyone for help to make him feel better, but no one took his hand. If it was you, how did you feel except being alone.”

Stress: The stress of adolescents caused by the inability to find an effective activity and pleasant communication and the worry of the inability to show real capability were included. “No one is thinking of entertaining us, we are all at home and we can’t make ourselves happy in any way”, “the family also expects you to be happy as if not as if COVID-19 has spread.”

Fear: Fear of rejection by saying things like “I’m worried about not being judged wrongly, I’m afraid I’ll do something stupid and my family will fight” and “It’s not clear whether the teacher was able to get to know you correctly” and “I’m afraid that I will lose my family” referred to this excitement”.

Anger: Suppressed anger caused by the feeling of lack of control over the situation and lack of autonomy is expressed in phrases, such as “no one understands us, they just expect us to study without having fun,” “we listen to the contents that we don’t like, we don’t see our friends,” “we have become like a robot that is assigned a program and it is only a performer.”

Unpleasant emotions during quarantine

Adolescents’ Reaction to Their Emotional Experiences: The results showed that adolescents by considering it useless to pay attention to their emotions, deny and ignore their emotions, and in most cases, they do not talk about these emotions with others, and they believe that discussions about emotions are useless as long as the situation cannot be changed. “When the situation is like this, talking about it is useless? I don’t like to talk about my feelings. Not all people have the same feelings and therefore others can’t understand me. So why should I talk? I’m a human being to argue with anyone, I don’t talk about my inner feelings with anyone.” This group of students tries to deal “logically” with ineffective documents. This purely cognitive method without understanding and experiencing the underlying emotion, instead of regulating interactions, will lead to replacing incompatible emotions in the long run.

The Reaction of Others to the Emotional Experiences of Adolescents: In the meantime, a few adolescents often face reactions devoid of empathy from their relatives, and by saying sentences like “you have to get used to,” “thousands of kids are studying like you now and are in quarantine, it’s better not to think about it,” they complained about the lack of empathy and companionship of their parents, in understanding the annoying positions

and the lack of entertainment during quarantine. While protesting the way adults deal with the difficulties of virtual education and quarantine, they demanded more acceptance of their influence on the existing conditions. Similar to the theory of self-determination [29], they denounced the uncontrollable and commanding conditions of education officials and parents in which they do not see any right to choose for themselves in the process of education and quarantine, demanding more useful participation and entertainment.

4. Discussion

A review of empirical evidence showed that social isolation, perceived risk, physical discomfort, fear of disease, anger, depression, feeling of emptiness, and stress were among the inevitable consequences of COVID-19 on mental health [8, 11-13]. The findings of the present study were consistent with previous studies. Consistent with the hypothesis of the research, which was to describe the emotions of adolescents, it was found that they express incompatible emotions under the influence of quarantine.

Like other age groups, the mental health of adolescents was threatened by the consequences of quarantine. The COVID-19 crisis was a new experience that, unlike other incidents and disasters, changed interpersonal communication, social relations, and subsequently mental health and emotions [23]. Not being familiar with social capital, ambiguity, distance from friends, virtual education which was new for many adolescents, individual differences in resilience, and the use of coping strategies have influenced the level of expressing negative emotions and maladaptive experiences of adolescents [6, 7, 12]. According to the findings of the present research and consistent with the research of Ojaji, Okoloba Veskaldi [32], the feelings of adolescents were due to a lack of entertainment and a lack of engagement in effective activities. According to the research of Lee, Nai, and Bai [21], the active and adaptive facing of people with the challenges caused by accidents requires that in addition to providing the basic needs of people, psychological capital in the age group of adolescents and children be also equipped with the skills, habits, and capacities so that they can respond to the consequences of incidents less dangerously and more safely. Providing people's basic psychological needs and increasing their use of psychological capital is effective in strengthening internal motivation, improving well-being, and facilitating a faster transition from crisis conditions [13-15, 22]. The existence of the supporting role of teachers and families as a psychological capital helps to facilitate the situation and the effort of teachers and parents to understand adolescents in the existing

conditions will lead to the realization of their participation, the formation of a sense of belonging, and the removal of their boredom [18, 28]. The family also plays a prominent role in creating resilient conditions; intimate family relationships are effective in reducing the consequences [1, 32, 9]. Based on this, family education and providing a context for dialogue can be effective in creating the mental health of adolescents.

5. Conclusion

Finally, the expressed experiences of adolescents can provide researchers with empirical evidence for further studies in the field of post-traumatic growth perception and strategies for dealing with accidents and disasters in adolescents, maintaining mental health, and keeping interpersonal relationships safe in disasters. Among the limitations of the current research was the research sample, the participants in this research were adolescents living in Tehran City. Also, the existence of welfare facilities, the conditions that facilitate quarantine, and the quality of health services have affected the research findings and their lived experience, and it is desirable to control them in future studies. Due to the existing conditions, the interviews were conducted online, which was beyond the control of the researchers

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

All adolescents participated in the interviews with their consent and privacy and the principle of confidentiality of the information and obtaining permission from the school administration.

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Authors' contributions

All authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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