

The Quest for Positive Youth Development Programs in the Post-Pandemic Era

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The COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis that has adversely impaired the mental health of young people. The study conducted by Kaman et al. [1] clearly demonstrates this point. In fact, many studies showed that the mental health of young people deteriorated during the pandemic years but there has been a “gradual improvement” in the post-pandemic period [2,3]. There are several points one should note when understanding the “gradual improvement” findings. First, as there is wide variation in the changing prevalence rates of the mental problems of young people in the post-pandemic era, there is a need to identify the related moderators. Second, the “gradual improvement” may be explained in terms of research design, time of data collection, statistical artifacts such as regression to the mean, sample attrition (i.e., only those who survived continued the study), or genuine improvement of the mental health of young people. Third, through the growth opportunities provided by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is the possibility that the coping abilities of young people have actually been strengthened. Hence, interpretations of the “gradual improvement” finding should proceed with caution [4]. Besides, to avoid having the illusion that young people’s mental health has become “better” in the post-pandemic period, we should be conscious of the fact that the mental health of young people was already poor in the pre-COVID-19 pandemic period.

Second, the study by Kaman et al. [1] underscores the importance of conducting longitudinal studies in understanding the dynamic nature of mental health of young people. Analyses of longitudinal analyses via advanced statistical analyses can help to understand the trajectories of mental health development in young people and the causal and reciprocal relationships amongst the variables under consideration. Such findings provide important pointers for intervention strategies, particularly mental health policies for adolescents and emerging adults. In reality, it is difficult to conduct longitudinal studies on the mental health of young people because of several reasons: lack of manpower and financial resources, lack of understanding of the importance of longitudinal studies by Government officials, lack of long-term vision, and the quest for “fast-food” mental health research that can be published quickly in the academia ... etc. On the national and international levels, colleagues who are passionate about the mental health of young people should join hands to conduct more longitudinal studies to chart the related mental health and related determinants which can enrich our understanding of the risk and protective factors involved. Of course, hearing the voices of young people in the pandemic and post-pandemic periods are also important [5].

Kaman et al. [1] also highlighted the crises related worries in young people. This certainly deserves much attention of paediatric researchers and practitioners for two reasons. First, the world is turbulent because of geopolitical conflicts, notably the war between Ukraine and Russia and the inter-racial conflict and humanitarian crisis in the Middle East and Africa. Second, adults commonly assume that wars and geopolitical conflicts are “adult affairs” which do not affect young people because they are “too young”. This assumption is obviously incorrect because young people may have both correct and incorrect understanding of the world through the Internet. Hence, we need to strengthen the developmental assets of young people,

such as cognitive competence, problem-solving and coping abilities, particularly through positive youth development programs [6].

In their review of the PYD programs in Canada and the US, Donovan et al. [7] reported that the programs attempted to build up skills, agency, enabling environment and contribution in young people. There are several observations on the skills covered in the studies under review. First, while psychosocial competences may contribute to resilience, the programs under review did not strongly focus on individual resilience which is very important particularly in terms of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, it is important to ask whether the AQ (adversity quotient) of young people can be promoted. Besides, amongst the psychosocial skills, EQ (emotional quotient) is important under adversity, particularly on how one handles negative emotional responses in response to adversity. Second, spirituality does not exist in the programs under review. According to Victor Frankl, if one has no life meaning (i.e., existential vacuum), mental problems would come in to “fill the vacuum”. Hence, it is vital to nurture the SQ (spiritual quotient) of young people because those who find the “why” of living under adversity knows the “how” [8]. Finally, although character is a cardinal developmental asset in positive youth development, the review does not show any related intervention programs. Obviously, character strengths such as bravery, perseverance, love, kindness, social intelligence, forgiveness, prudence, gratitude and hope in the Values in Action model are indispensable in the pandemic and post-pandemic periods.

Regarding enabling environment, the review only found related studies in the education and school context. With reference to the ecological perspective, a young person develops within different systems such as the family, school, peer, community, the nation and the globe. Hence, besides promoting individual resilience, enhancement of other systems to effectively responding to adversity is important. In particular, as the family is a refuge place for family members under adverse conditions, how to strengthen family resilience is an important intervention focus [9]. According to Walsh, there are three main domains in family resilience with three elements in each domain [10]. These domains and elements are: family beliefs system (constructing positive meaning about adversity, maintaining a positive view of adversity, and transcending challenges and spirituality), organizational patterns (flexible role arrangements, cohesion, connectedness, and social and economic resources), and communication processes (information clarity, open emotional responses, and collaborative problem solving). In the scientific literature, there are comparatively more studies and intervention programs on the enhancement of individual resilience than family resilience. Conceptually speaking, researchers and practitioners should re-think about the issue of enhancing intra-personal versus interpersonal developmental assets to promote the well-being of adolescents and emerging adults via positive youth development programs in the post-pandemic era.

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