

# Impact Factors of Adolescent Generalized Anxiety Disorder

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## Abstract:

Incidence rates of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) have been on the rise in recent years, making it a growing public health problem among teenagers. In order to examine the main internal and external variables influencing the occurrence of teenage GAD, this study synthesizes the most recent research. Internal factors such as low self-esteem, diminished social self-efficacy, and poor emotion regulation are identified as central vulnerabilities that increase susceptibility to anxiety. For instance, low self-esteem mediates the impact of childhood trauma on anxiety symptoms, while social self-efficacy and adaptive emotion regulation strategies serve as protective buffers. However, outside variables serve as intensifiers and triggers. The incidence and duration of GAD are greatly influenced by a number of factors, including environmental stressors like bullying and excessive social media usage, family dynamics like parental over-worry and lack of emotional acceptance, and academic stress, especially uncertainty and competition pressure. Additionally, these outside variables frequently reinforce one another, increasing the likelihood of anxiety among teenagers. The results emphasize the need for early prevention and focused interventions that combine environmental-level tactics (e.g., lowering academic uncertainty, improving family acceptance, and putting anti-bullying policies into place) with individual-level support (e.g., emotion regulation training, self-esteem building). Together, these measures can mitigate the growing burden of adolescent GAD and promote long-term mental well-being.

**Keywords:** Adolescent, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, impact factors

## 1. Introduction

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) has already

been an important public health problem. By the reach of recent one decade, the incidence rate of adolescent GAD is showing the upward trend. The

characterized of adolescent GAD is excessive worry about various domains such as relationship, the no determinacy of future and so on. This disorder will not only influence the recent social mentality, will also make the adolescent become the long-term risk of depression, academic underachievement when they grow up. Although the burden is increasing, the emergency of adolescent GAD remains a subject of existence persistently scholarly inquiry. While the early research focused individual level factors such as genetic predispositions and neurobiological, recent studies raise to emphasize the environment factors, including the increasing of academic pressure, the change of family system, and the increasing of the expose of social environment pressure. The aim of the paper is to synthesize the available evidence and analysis the key internal and external factors internal and external influencing factors caused the prevalence rate of adolescent GAD raise up.

## **2. Introduction to Key Concepts**

### **2.1 Adolescent Generalized Anxiety Disorder**

Adolescent Generalized Anxiety Disorder means anxiety disorder occur on teenagers characterized by excessive and uncontrollable worry about multiple areas. Patient always have the behavior such as difficult to pay attention, easily tired and so on. Moreover, patients' symptoms heavily influence their academic achievement, social skills, and daily life.

### **2.2 Basic Treatment Methods**

Nowadays, the main treatment methods for adolescent GAD include psychological intervention and medical therapy. Psychological intervention mainly focuses on cognitive behavioral therapy, which can help teenagers identify and correct negative cognitive patterns. The medical therapy is mainly used for the patient who have very heavy anxiety. It always used selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, such as sertraline and fluoxetine and so on. However, if people need to use the medicines, they need used under the psychiatrist [1].

## **3. Internal Factors for GAD among Adolescents**

### **3.1 A Review of Internal Influencing Factors of Generalized Anxiety Disorder in Adolescent**

Adolescent GAD is characterized by excessive and uncontrollable worry, often accompanied by physical symptoms such as fatigue and difficult to focus on somethings.

Its pathogenesis involves the complex effect of internal factors. In the recent years, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation ability become the mainly internal factors. Having deep exploration regulation of the factors is important theoretical and practical value for the early identification of GAD.

### **3.2 The Association of Self-Esteem with Adolescent GAD**

Self-esteem as the main evaluation of oneself, is closely associated with the happen and development of GAD in adolescents. Many studies have already confirmed that low self-esteem is an important risk factor for GAD and become a necessarily mediate between early adversity and anxiety symptoms [2]. In an experiment, making an 18-year longitudinal follow-up study found that children who suffer from abused increased the risk of anxiety symptoms such as GAD when they become adults by eroding individual's self-esteem. This mediating effect remains after control such as demographics and socioeconomic level. The study reports assess childhood abuse, standard the level to measure self-esteem, and interviews anxiety symptoms, providing the strong evidence of early abused influence the low self-esteem and then effect the GAD [1]. Studies on a specific groups have further provide for this association. A study focusing on overweight African American adolescent girls showed that about self-esteem damage caused by long-term bullied was highly correlated with anxiety. This low self-esteem may be a possible internal trigger for GAD in specific groups [3]. From the perspective of personality traits, individuals with high neuroticism are often accompanied by negative self-cognition, and their self-esteem levels are significantly lower than those with emotional stability. It may further exacerbate the risk impact of low self-esteem on GAD.

Although existing studies consistently confirm the association between low self-esteem and GAD, limitations remain, such as reliance on self-report data and insufficient examination of cultural variations: most studies rely on self-report data, which tends to recall bias, and There is insufficient exploration of boundary conditions, such as gender differences and cultural backgrounds, that may moderate the relationship between self-esteem and GAD.

### **3.3 The Protective Effect of Self-efficacy on Adolescent GAD**

Self-efficacy means an individual's subjective cognize of their ability to complete specific tasks. Among the protective effects of social self-efficacy on GAD in adolescents is prominent. A study conducted a multi-time point longitudinal study and found that adolescents' social self-efficacy

cy was significantly negatively associated with social anxiety. Low social self-efficacy could prospectively predict an increased risk of social anxiety, and social anxiety is an important component of the anxiety spectrum is often a precursor symptom of GAD [4].

Research on Chinese sexual minority adolescents provide cross population support for this protective mechanism. Using latent profile analysis, the study identified subgroups at high risk of want to kill themselves and found that low self-efficacy was a core internal factor associated with elevated anxiety including GAD in high risk groups [5].

Neurophysiologically, individuals with high self-efficacy commonly exhibit low limbic system activation and more stable sympathetic responses to pressure which may reduce the excessive effect about the neurobiological associated with generalized anxiety disorder. Although these insights, there are also some disadvantages in the research: the focus only on social anxiety, limit on generalization to generalized anxiety disorder [4]. The failure to cognitive between the social and academic self-efficacy obscures the unique role of social competence [5]. Both two research both are not check how self-efficacy interacts with other internal factors to influence Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

### 3.4 A Core Regulator of GAD Susceptibility

Emotion regulation ability is the ability to show evaluate and modify emotional responses which is a foundational internal factor government adolescent GAD risk [6]. Research exploring the line mediating role of emotion regulation in the relationship between the addiction on internet and anxiety from the college students used structural equation modeling and found that internet addiction damage emotion regulation ability. GAD as a representative anxiety disorder, it was significantly negatively correlated with emotion regulation competence [2]. This confirms that the emotion regulation deficits are not only correlates but also potential causal factors of GAD.

The type of emotion regulation strategy further modulates GAD risk. A study investigating Chinese children and adolescents found that negative cognitive emotion regulation strategies extended the effect of bullying victimization on anxiety, while positive strategies buffered this impact [7]. However, these studies have methodological limitations: the cross-sectional designs preclude causal conclusions about emotion regulation and GAD [6,7]. Both studies are not explored neural mechanisms such as structural and functional changes in the anterior cingulate cortex in relation to GAD.

### 3.5 Conclusion of the Internal Factors

Self-esteem, social self-efficacy, and emotional regulation ability are the interrelated core intrinsic factors influencing GAD in adolescents: Self-esteem mediates the long-term effects of early adversity, such as childhood abuse, on GAD development, social self-efficacy protects the development of anxiety, and emotional regulation ability regulates overall susceptibility [2,4,6,7]. Although existing research has laid the foundation, there are still gaps in causal reasoning, sample diversity and mechanism understanding. Future research should integrate longitudinal design, neuroimaging, and diverse sampling to deepen theoretical insights and provide evidence-based support for individualized prevention and intervention of generalized anxiety disorder in adolescents.

## 4. External Factors for GAD among Adolescents

### 4.1 A Review of External Influencing Factors of Generalized Anxiety Disorder in Adolescent

External factors indirectly induce or aggravate the symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder by shaping the living environment, social interaction patterns and stress experiences of adolescents. Current empirical research mainly focuses on three core dimensions: academic pressure, family relationships, and social environment. Although the conclusion that “external factors are significantly associated with GAD” has been reached as a consensus, there are differences in research methods, sample characteristics, and conclusion details, which also expose some research disadvantages.

### 4.2 Anxiety Caused Under the Pressure of the Further Education Competition

Academic pressure is the most common external stressor among teenagers. Its association with generalized anxiety disorder has been confirmed by multi-scenario studies, and there is a clear correlation between “stress type” and “anxiety intensity”[8]. McLoone et al. examined 823 junior high school students from five Australian secondary schools as research participants. They adopted the school cluster sampling method and a mixed research design that questionnaire survey and teacher evaluation and classified academic pressure into three categories - “task pressure”, “competitive pressure” and “uncertainty pressure” - through the “Academic Pressure Scale”. Meanwhile, the symptoms of GAD were evaluated using the Child Anxiety Scale. The results show that “uncertainty pressure” has the strongest predictive effect on GAD, followed by

“competitive pressure”, while the simple “task volume pressure” has no significant correlation with GAD. This study also conducted cross-validation through the “classroom anxiety behaviors” evaluated by teachers, further confirming that the “sense of uncontrollability” in academic pressure is a key factor inducing GAD [8].

Although existing research has clarified the mechanism of academic stress, similar studies still have obvious limitations: Firstly, most of them adopt cross-sectional designs. For example, a domestic study involving 1,200 high school students can only prove that “teenagers with high academic pressure have a higher incidence of GAD” but cannot distinguish the causal direction. Secondly, most of the samples are concentrated in the junior high school stage, and there is insufficient research on the pressure at key enrollment nodes such as the “high school entrance examination” and the “college entrance examination”, making it difficult to reflect the impact of pressure differences at different academic stages on GAD. Thirdly, there is a lack of discussion on “academic support resources”, such as whether “teacher tutoring” and “peer assistance” can buffer the impact of academic pressure on generalized anxiety disorder. There is no clear conclusion yet.

### 4.3 The double Impact of Parenting Styles and Emotional Support

As the core environment for the growth of teenagers, the quality of relationships such as parenting styles and emotional acceptance in the family influences GAD through two paths: “cognitive transmission” and “emotional feedback”. The intensity of influence from different family dimensions varies within the group [9]. Fisak et al. took 186 American community adolescents as a sample, focusing on the cognitive dimension of “parental worry perception”. Measures teenagers’ subjective judgment on whether their parents are overly concerned about their academic performance, health, and social life. At the same time, the symptoms were evaluated using the GAD Scale. The results show that even if the actual anxiety levels of parents are controlled, the “perceived anxiety of parents” of teenagers is still strongly positively correlated with their own generalized anxiety disorder symptoms. Research indicates that excessive worry from parents can lead teenagers to form the erroneous perception that “only by constantly worrying can one deal with risks” through “cognitive imitation” and subsequently develop the typical “excessive worry” thinking pattern of generalized anxiety disorder [9].

Wang et al. supplemented the role of family relationships from the dimension of “emotional acceptance”. Their research involved 327 sexual minority adolescents in China.

They used latent profile analysis to categorize family relationships into three types: “high acceptance type” (parents acknowledge their children’s sexual orientation and provide emotional support), “low acceptance type” (parents avoid related topics and do not communicate actively), and “conflict type” (parents deny sexual orientation, verbally criticize or have physical conflicts). The results show that the incidence of GAD among adolescents in “conflict-type” families is the highest (68.2%), followed by “low-acceptance” families (42.5%), and the lowest in “high-acceptance” families (21.5%). Further analysis reveals that the anxiety of LGBTQ and teenagers does not directly stem from their identity itself, but rather from the emotional deprivation caused by their families’ rejection of this identity [5].

### 4.4 The Both Effect between Social Media Use and School Bullying

The influence of the social environment on adolescent GAD mainly stems from “social media use” and “school bullying”, and there is a “complementary” relationship between the two. Excessive use of social media may increase the risk of exposure to bullying, and bullying experiences can exacerbate social media dependence, ultimately jointly triggering generalized anxiety disorder. Keles and Stankovic’s analysis integrated 32 empirical studies conducted globally from 2010 to 2021, involving 52,000 adolescents aged 12 to 18, systematically exploring the relationship between social media use and generalized anxiety disorder. The results show that the two are correlated in an “inverted U-shaped” curve: Moderate use (1–2 hours per day) shows no significant effect on GAD, suggesting that balanced engagement with social media may not necessarily be harmful. Excessive use (more than 4 hours a day, frequent browsing of negative news, and participation in social comparisons of “perfect roles”) can increase the risk of generalized anxiety disorder by 1.8 times. Meanwhile, “cyberbullying” is a key mediating variable. Teenagers who overuse social media are 3.2 times more likely to encounter cyberbullying, which in turn undermines interpersonal trust and self-confidence, such as “malicious comments”, “rumor spreading” and “social exclusion” than moderate users. Experiences of cyberbullying can further intensify anxiety through “interpersonal distrust” and “self-denial”. The advantage of this study lies in the adoption of the meta-analysis method. Through heterogeneity tests, the interference of regional and cultural differences in samples was eliminated, and the conclusion has strong universality [10].



#### 4.5 Conclusion of External Factors

In the external factors, “uncertain stress” in academic pressure can induce generalized anxiety disorder in adolescents. In terms of family relationships, excessive worry from parents and the lack of family emotional acceptance perceived by teenagers both increase the risk of GAD. In the social environment, excessive use of social media and school bullying jointly exacerbate GAD through social comparison pressure and interpersonal distrust, and the two complement each other. On this basis, it is suggested that families reduce the transmission of anxiety and enhance emotional acceptance, schools alleviate the pressure of academic uncertainty, and improve anti-bullying mechanisms to help protect the mental health of teenagers.

### 5. Discussion and Suggestion

#### 5.1 The Internal and External Factors Influence on the Adolescent GAD

The increase of GAD in adolescents is the result of the combined effect of internal and external factors. Internal factors are the “susceptibility basis” for the occurrence of GAD in adolescents: low self-esteem amplifies the impact of childhood trauma on GAD, low social self-efficacy makes adolescents more prone to anxiety when facing social challenges, and negative emotion regulation strategies directly aggravate anxiety symptoms [2,4,6,7]. These internal traits determine the “susceptibility” of adolescents to anxiety. External factors are “triggering and intensifying factors”: The “uncertainty pressure” in academic studies, the transmission of excessive worry from parents in the family and the lack of emotional acceptance, as well as the excessive use of social media and school bullying in the social environment, can activate internal susceptible traits, such as making those with low self-esteem more prone to self-denial due to social comparison and making it more difficult for those who regulate negative emotions to cope with academic pressure, ultimately leading to the emergence and persistence of GAD symptoms [8,10]. At the same time, external factors also mutually influence each other; for example, excessive social media use may increase exposure to school bullying. For instance, excessive use of social media may increase the risk of exposure to school bullying, further intensifying the negative impact on adolescent GAD.

#### 5.2 Suggestions for Families and Schools

Parents should avoid frequently expressing excessive concerns about their teenagers’ academic performance and future development in front of them. Instead, they should

adopt a “problem-solving” communication approach. For example, when teenagers are under exam pressure, they should jointly analyze the review plan and identify their weak points in knowledge with them instead of emphasizing that “if they don’t do well in the exam, they have no future”. This can reduce teenagers’ negative perception of parental worries and foster healthier communication patterns. Avoid forming cognitive imitation of “excessive worry” [9].

Establish an anti-bullying policy covering both traditional campus and online scenarios, including anonymous reporting systems and peer mediation programs, set up class reporting boxes and a regular interview system with psychological counselors, and promptly detect and handle bullying behaviors. Conduct cognitive education for bullies, provide psychological counseling and social support to victims, and help rebuild interpersonal trust. At the same time, guide teenagers to use social media reasonably, limit the daily usage time, and reduce the pressure of cyberbullying and social comparison [10].

### 6. Conclusion

This study focuses on the “Influencing Factors of the Growth of GAD in Adolescents”, focus on two main types of factors: internal and external. Among internal factors, low self-esteem, low social self-efficacy, and negative emotion regulation strategies can significantly increase the risk of GAD in adolescents, and self-esteem plays a mediating role between childhood trauma and GAD. Among external factors, the “uncertainty pressure” in academic pressure, the excessive worry and lack of emotional acceptance perceived by teenagers from their parents in families, and the excessive use of social media and school bullying in the social environment can all induce or aggravate GAD through different paths. Moreover, external factors such as academic stress and social media use have mutually reinforcing relationships that exacerbate adolescent GAD.

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