IN THEIR OWN WORDS: RURAL ADOLESCENT STRESSORS AND RELATIONSHIP TO DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS

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Abstract

Purpose: Exposure to negative life experiences and stressors can place an adolescent at a risk for the development of depressive symptoms. One of the best predictors of development of depressive symptoms is stress. Understanding the relationships between stressors adolescents experience and the development of depressive symptoms may help to identify vulnerability factors that could be targeted with depression prevention interventions. This study examined the types of stressful, negative experiences rural young adolescents described (N=79) and the nature of the relationship between number of stressor themes and depressive symptoms.

Methods: A mixed methods secondary analysis study was conducted, utilizing data collected in a cross-sectional, descriptive correlational study. Participants completed a checklist used to measure a wide range of negative life events normally occurring among adolescents and another checklist that measured the frequency of depressive symptoms. Participants were able to then freely report any additional stressful life events, and all responses were analyzed using content analysis and assigned qualitative themes. The themes were converted to numerical data to measure the frequency of the themes using descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations.

Findings: The primary sample consisted of slightly more females than males (63% and 35%, respectively), and ranged in age from 12-15 years. Of the sample of 129 participants, 78 participants voluntarily described any other negative life stressors they wished to report. A total of four domains were established: family, peers, academics, and intrapersonal conflicts. Within each of the domains, 3 separate themes were identified. In the family domain, all responses were assigned into the themes of loss, family expectations, and family turmoil. In the peers domain, the common themes were interpersonal conflict, romantic relationship issues, and loss. Conflict with authorities, low achievement, and academic expectations were the common themes in the academics domain. Lastly, in the intrapersonal conflicts domain, participants appeared to demonstrate a lack of perceived control, evolving coping skills, and unrealized goals and expectations.

Conclusions: The high number of reports related to intrapersonal conflict and family domains suggests that young rural adolescents tend to experience more stressful life events within the home and a lack of perceived control in their lives. Findings suggest that rural young adolescents frequently feel a sense of loss in their lives and are often experience conflicts with others in every social aspect (academic, peer, and family). More research is needed to determine why these adolescents experience these stressful life events and ways on how to reduce these unique stressors. Future research would benefit from examining a wider variety of stressors and could inform of future interventions with rural youth to minimize the effects of negative life events and promote positive mental health.

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