TEEN EXPERIENCES OF UNCERTAINTY AND COPING DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The pandemic has created uncertainty in nearly every aspect of daily life. Uncertainty has made its way across the news and social media with rather obvious concerns related to exposure to COVID-19, access to medical care, and concerns about the stability of the economy that includes job and food security. There are more salient, equally valid concerns beyond these as experienced by, and may be specific to school-aged individuals. This study intends to capture uncertainty as experienced by school-aged individuals from junior high school to college and the participants' coping mechanisms. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to focus on the participant's insights into their own experiences. The semi-structured interview was accomplished through an online platform that was opted to comply with the pandemic regulations. Thematic analysis of the responses of the sample (N=15) yielded the theme of student-related pressure for causes of uncertainty and psychological flexibility for coping mechanisms. Causes include insecurity of finances, the susceptibility to COVID, the probability of losing a family member consequently, and the eventual grief. Academic performance and choices included rumination about grades, requirements, and whether they would end up in their desired university. The coping techniques that proved helpful for them were mostly 1) grounding such as prayer and meditation; and 2) distracting like listening to music, talking to other people, and playing games. It is recommended that psychological flexibility skills be incorporated into the curriculum either through implicit or explicit lessons.

Keywords: uncertainty, psychological flexibility, social-emotional learning, coping, academic performance, Philippines

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered lives around the world including deaths in millions and forced isolation for reasons of safety and security. While social isolation has generally an unprecedented effect, on mental health specifically, there has been very little attention to the psychological toll of COVID-19 on adolescent mental health (Jones, Mitra, Bhuiyan, 2021). Social isolation is just one of the many things that affect teenagers.

Uncertainty is defined as a situation, outcome, or result that is unknown or unpredictable and is a common experience for teenagers as they navigate the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. During this period, adolescents often face numerous physical, emotional, and social changes, including identity formation and academic and career decisions.

Identity formation (Becht, Nelemans, Branje, Vollebergh, Koot, & Meeus, 2017). Teenagers are in the process of discovering their personal identity, including their values, beliefs, interests, and goals. They may experiment with different identities, experience conflicts between societal expectations and their own desires, and question their sense of self. This exploration can lead to uncertainty as they try to establish their identity. The authors added that adolescents reconsider current identity commitments and explore alternatives before they make strong commitments within the interpersonal identity domain across early to late adolescence.

Academic and career choices (Boo, Kim & Kim, 2022) or career anxiety is another area. Teenagers are often faced with important decisions regarding their education and future career paths. Choosing strands, selecting courses, subjects, colleges or universities, and contemplating future occupations can be really taxing. The pressure to make the right choices can create uncertainty and anxiety about their academic and professional futures. In the Philippines, there could be more pressure on teenagers to make important decisions regarding their education and future careers due to limited resources, unequal access to quality education, and the competitive nature of certain fields of work.

Social relationships is another significant area. (FeldmanHall, Shenhav, 2019). Teenagers experience significant changes in their social relationships. Uncertainties about the future is further compounded when dealing with others because of the fact that there is also something uncertain about who these individuals and how they would respond to them. Challenges in forming and maintaining friendships, romantic relationships, and family dynamics are commonplace. Peer pressure, conflicts, and the need for acceptance all contributory to uncertainty as teenagers navigate these social interactions and try to find their place within various social groups. Cultural expectations and societal norms may add to these as the Filipino culture places importance on family relationships, respect for authority, and maintaining harmony within social networks.

Physical and hormonal changes characterize adolescence. This is a time when the reproductive endocrine system becomes increasingly active (Reiter & Root, 1975). Teenagers may feel uncertain about their changing bodies and struggle with body image issues. These changes can also affect their self-confidence and contribute to feelings of uncertainty about their appearance and how they are perceived by others.

Uncertainties about the future plague teenagers as they wonder about what will happen after high school, after college and career path to pursue, where to live, or what their life will look like as adults. There are far too many things to think about and consider and pressure and possibilities combine vast array of possibilities and the pressure to make long-term decisions can create uncertainty and anxiety about the unknown. To add to this, there are economic disparities, poverty, and limited job prospects. The political ambiance and issues related to governance, corruption, and social inequalities can create an environment of uncertainty and unrest, impacting the daily lives and prospects of teenagers.

Technological advancements and the digital world do play a role in teen uncertainty as well. Filipino teenagers are exposed to a vast amount of information and social pressures. They can be subjected to constant comparison and cyberbullying, and they may even be compelled to create an online persona different from the real world. These can contribute to uncertainty and anxiety among teenagers.

Uncertainty however normal may indicate the need for additional support when it becomes excessive or prolonged. Efforts to support Filipino teenagers in navigating uncertainty can involve providing access to quality education, career guidance, mental health support, promoting positive social relationships, and addressing systemic issues of poverty and inequality. Encouraging open communication, providing guidance, and fostering a supportive environment can help teenagers navigate through this uncertain phase successfully.

People typically find uncertainty to be aversive (Carleton, 2016b) and are willing to pay to reduce uncertainty (Lovallo and Kahneman, 2000); Uncertainty and affective feelings are both fundamental aspects of human life and appear to be closely linked to each other. People experience affective feelings like anger, anxiety, and pleasure related to their perceived uncertainties.

Teen uncertainty in the Philippines can indeed be influenced by a range of factors, including cultural, social, and economic contexts. In the pandemic, as should be always, teens must be capacitated to get more comfortable with uncertainty, and to practice psychological flexibility. Research suggests that people who are more psychologically flexible have higher well-being and tend to be less anxious and worried (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006). Psychological flexibility is the tendency to respond to situations in ways that facilitate valued goal pursuit. It is useful when challenges arise or when a situation produces distress. Greater psychological flexibility and acceptance of difficult experiences appeared to act as a buffer against the negative effects of the pandemic such as increased social isolation (Smit, Twohy, Smith, 2020). psychological flexibility is considered the pinnacle of emotional health and well-being in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), A growing body of research demonstrates that psychological flexibility leads to psychological benefits and adaptive behavior change (Doorley, Goodman, & Kashdan, 2020). ACT combines mindfulness skills with the practice of self-acceptance to help individuals live and behave in ways consistent with personal values. Psychological flexibility is the capacity to adapt to difficult experiences while remaining true to one's values. ACT is based on the belief that acceptance and mindfulness are more adaptive responses to the inevitabilities of life. The coping mechanisms will be explained using the framework of ACT. ACT teaches individuals to be present with what life brings, to open up to unpleasant feelings, to face situations that invoke them, to learn how not to overreact, and to move toward valued behavior. It has six core processes that aim for a greater understanding of emotions and what can be done so that individuals can work towards what they value.

The six core processes are contacting the present moment (be here now), defusion (watch your thinking), acceptance (open up), self-as-context (pure awareness), values (know what matters), and committed action (do what it takes).

This study seeks to explore the experience of uncertainty and coping mechanisms in the context of teenagers. It is of interest what uncertainties they face during the pandemic and how they coped with those. Studying teen uncertainty is important because it can inform us about adolescent development. This period of development is crucial because it is characterized by significant physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. Exploring teen uncertainty can shed light on the unique challenges and experiences teenagers face during this transitional phase and how they cope with those. Through this, the helping professionals can gain insights into the factors that contribute to adolescent development and well-being. This study also intends to inform interventions and support. (Source) prolonged or excessive experience of uncertainty may be at risk of negative outcomes, such as increased stress, anxiety, or decision-making difficulties. Research on teen uncertainty can help identify risk factors, protective factors, and effective coping strategies. This knowledge can inform the development of interventions, support programs, and resources that can help teenagers navigate uncertainty in a healthy and adaptive manner.3. Enhancing communication and relationships: Understanding teen uncertainty can improve communication and relationships between teenagers and adults, including parents, educators, and healthcare providers. By gaining insights into the experiences, concerns, and needs of teenagers, adults can better support and guide them through this phase of uncertainty. It can foster empathy, promote effective communication, and strengthen relationships that are crucial for the well-being and development of teenagers.4. Promoting resilience and positive development: Uncertainty can be both challenging and an opportunity for growth. By studying teen uncertainty, researchers can explore how certain factors, such as resilience, self-efficacy, and social support, contribute to positive outcomes in the face of uncertainty. This knowledge can inform strategies and interventions aimed at promoting resilience and facilitating positive development in teenagers.5. Contributing to broader knowledge: Teen uncertainty is a topic of interest within various fields, including psychology, sociology, and education. By studying teen uncertainty, researchers can contribute to the broader understanding of human development, decision-making processes, and the ways individuals navigate uncertainty throughout their lives. This knowledge can have implications beyond adolescence and provide insights into uncertainty in different stages of life. In summary, studying teen uncertainty is important for understanding adolescent development, informing interventions and support, enhancing communication and relationships, promoting resilience, and contributing to the broader knowledge of human experiences.

This study will benefit the helping professionals in the academic community as they create and implement development and intervention programs for teenagers in Junior high school to college.

Materials and Methods

Design. A qualitative approach using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to obtain an exploration of the personal experience of teenagers on uncertainty and their coping mechanisms (Tomkins, 2017). It attempts to capture the complexities and nuances of the experiences of uncertainty and their coping mechanisms (Smith & Osborn, 2003). By giving voice to and making sense of these experiences, the study attained an insider perspective of lived experiences.

Participants. There were 15 randomly selected participants consisting of junior high school (5), senior high school (3), and college students (7) in Luzon and Mindanao, ages ranging from 13 to 21. Creswell (2013) states that in a phenomenological research study, the process of collecting information involves primary in-depth interviews with as many as 10 individuals. The number of participants will be enough to spark new insights and reveal information about the context of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018. The participants were given informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any point in the interview. Moreover, the participants were guided toward the study's goal and objective.

Instrument and Data Gathering. A semi-structured interview was accomplished through an online platform that was opted to comply with the pandemic regulations. There were (definition, areas, reaction, coping) three focal questions and the data collection approach invited the participants to provide a detailed first-person account of their experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Research questions included which areas of life they experienced uncertainty, their behavioral reactions, and how they coped. Interviews lasted for less than an hour and participants were allowed to speak in either English or tagalog or a combination of both. The interview was conducted in a setting where only the

participant and the researcher were present which helped ensure confidentiality, enhanced participant comfort, prevented interruptions, and eliminated the possibility of others contaminating the data. Before the actual interview, written and verbal consent were sought and an explanation of the purpose and how the data will be used was made.

Data Analysis. To gain an 'insider perspective' of experience, IPA required a double hermeneutic which is bound by both the participant's capacity to articulate their experiences, and the investigator's ability to dissect them (Alase, 2017). IPA is a detailed and in-depth examination of how individual persons in their unique contexts make sense of a given phenomenon. An informative understanding of participants' thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors is attained through an individualized analysis (Alase, 2017). IPA offers a set of common principles starting with but not limited to thematic analysis.

Steps in the data analysis included reading of the transcripts and note-making. This initial stage involved reading and rereading of transcripts to enable full immersion in the process. Audio recordings of the interview were listened to as well as how things were said pen annotated coding will help ensure that distinctive voices will emerge from participant's narratives, rather than pre-existing notions present in the literature. After reading, re-reading, and annotating the transcript, the document was dealt with from the beginning emerging themes were documented. Emergent themes were connected and clustered emergent themes according to conceptual similarities or sub-themes (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Clustered themes emerged as superordinate concepts. Then a table of themes was produced which situated the sub-themes within their respective superordinate theme, along with a relevant data extract or quote beside each theme. This was done case by case, continuing to the next case after finishing a case, which involved moving on to the next transcript and repeating the process. Once each transcript had been analyzed, a final table of superordinate themes and their respective sub-themes was produced.

Ethical Considerations. In addition to attaining informed consent and protecting anonymity, constant monitoring of the effect of the interview upon the participants will be made.

Results and Discussions

The responses of the participants were grouped into themes that matched the core processes of ACT. Responses on Table 1 answer the question on which areas of the life of a teenager they feel uncertain. Table 1 shows the causes of uncertainty that include the subthemes of family, academics, and career which cluster up to the main theme of student-related pressures. This is consistent with the findings that around the world up to 20% of adolescents suffer from mental health which were influenced by the vulnerability of adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jones, Mitra, & Bhuiyan; (2021). According to the same study, there are negative outcomes associated with poor mental health statuses among adolescents, such as suicide, behavior problems, and emotional distress. This points to the need to capacitate teenagers with skills that will allow them to face their situations and enable them to be more flexible and thus prevent mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression.

Table 1. Causes of Uncertainty

Subtheme	Superordinate Theme	Codes
Main Theme: Student-Related Pressures		
Family	Support	How life goes on without parents or guidance, guardians especially with our age; Fear of getting kicked out of my own home because of low grades
	Struggles	During pandemic there's a lot of uncertain things happened. Suddenly something happened for example the situation of my cousin he was very strong physically but when he tested positive for COVID his condition changed and got worse until his body couldn't fight anymore. My cousin passed away we just didn't expect that things would end like that, because we knew he was physically fit

		during that time, so there I realized that life is so uncertain. We don't know things; we don't know what tomorrow brings to us; During the 1st phase of the Pandemic. We are not privileged to be financially stable to survive day by day plus being diagnosed with nephrolithiasis; When we got a huge family problem, that's the moment I realized that the future is uncertain for us; when if I should do my module first or help my mom clean the house;
	Attention	When my family has a problem and at school sometimes, I feel stressed or depressed because of the deadlines all at once.
	Mastery	Every time I take examinations; Choosing the correct answer on an exam; when I'm taking an exam and I'm not sure of the answer; Grades and Performance evaluation per semester; After submitting a quiz or a project; Currently, mostly during school activities I find difficult to understand it's full context, but you are required to finish is during a certain deadline. So when I perform the activity, I doubt whether if what I'm doing is correct or not, or there are some mistakes.
Academics	Skills Acquisition	Doubting the chosen program; what strand to choose; and school modules because modules are so hard to understand; Answering my modules. I don't know if it's the right answer to that question; When I don't know how to use the piano; When attending class, there are times that our teacher will ask a question, I want to answer but I'm not sure if my answer is correct or not, I was hesitant, so I'll just stay quiet. Also, in making some decisions; research defense
Career	Goals	Feeling uncertain if I can accomplish my career goals; I often wonder if I'm on the right path or if some of my decisions in life are worth fighting for; choosing a course; I am uncertain about my options in life and whether I am doing well or not; I was sometimes uncertain about what I was doing in my life, especially at school where I feel so tired and don't have the energy to study; Uncertain on the program you will choose before college; choosing my college course; When I am uncertain if I want to continue studying or not.
	Support	If I have a good future awaiting on me or I will be useless to my family the society; Making a successful career decision for my future; I have been a working student since my first year of college, I always have this uncertainty if I can do it, to graduate and have a degree. But as time went by, I kept on struggling and not giving up because I knew

		that I could do it no matter how hard the situation, how poor we were, how it stressed me out, and how hard to manage time; taking accountancy course even though I know that this course is hard and I am not sure if I will be able to pass through it.
Interpersonal	Influence	When I am uncertain about other people's moods, and I really don't know how to approach them. My mind urges me to do something but I am uncertain which is why I usually panic; I have difficulties interacting with other people on the first day of new school or meeting new people; When I am in school I feel everyone is judging me; I uncertain about how/what to respond, because sometimes I cannot directly respond to other people on time because I feel like the words/phrase I use is not right

In the interest of capacitating teenagers with skills to improve their experience of uncertainty and to prevent negative outcomes brought about by the compromised situation of the pandemic, the coping mechanisms were investigated. Table 2 shows how the participants coped and have been coping with uncertainty. The six core processes, namely, contact with the present moment (be here now); self-as-context (pure awareness), acceptance (open up); defusion (watch your thinking); committed action (do what it takes); and values (know what matters) are also the skills that make up psychological flexibility. These made up the subordinate themes that yielded the subthemes of "being present, "opening up," and "doing what matters" which also corresponds to the ACT framework (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006).

Table 2. Coping Mechanism for Uncertainty

Subtheme	Superordinate Theme	Codes
Main Theme: Psychological Flexibility		
Being Present	Awareness	Calmed me down; Listen to music and trusting myself; collected myself
	Contact with the present moment	In times of uncertainty, I always have this mindset of just going with the flow at that moment and thinking, although it was scary, it would help me improve and learn many things; When I thought I lost something important to me. I spent a couple of months on it so I was quite worried. After I knew it was gone for good, got over it pretty quickly; there was nothing I can do about it anyway so why worry anymore
Opening Up	Acceptance	Doing breathing exercises to calm my mind, ask God for help, and do whatever I can to ease my mind.
	Watching one's thoughts	try not to think about it and do something else
Doing what matters	Knowing what matters	think about what I can do about the situation; Prayer and faith in God and I always assure myself that everything will be fine; talk to someone about it, look into it to see what I can to do improve my situation.
	Doing what it takes	develop new skills; I guess preparing for the outcomes of the different possibilities. Mostly

		just doing what I can now instead of thinking about the future; look for something that I can be sure of with myself. I mean, I just try to do things on my own, I solve it by just thinking and improving myself so I can be better. And no more doubts about those things; developing myself and those things that I am doubtful about...trying to do certain things that can help me to erase those uncertain things and to develop myself more to became certain; self-love (confidence)

The ACT framework is used because it has been found to o decrease suffering and increase well-being through the six core processes of change (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012). It emphasizes awareness and openness, as opposed to avoiding painful situations and feelings.

The subtheme of doing what matters consist of the superordinate themes of knowing what matters and doing what it takes. Knowing what matters or valuing is knowing what truly matters to oneself. When broken down to smaller steps, this includes values clarification that should aid one in choosing life directions. Clarifying values is an essential step in creating a meaningful life. In ACT, we often refer to values as "chosen life directions. Doing what it takes is also called committed action or taking effective action that is guided by an individual's values. Together, these two superordinate themes gathered the greatest number of responses from the participants.

The subtheme of being present consists of the superordinate themes of awareness and contact with the present moment. Awareness or Self-as-Context is also called the observing self. It is the aspect of oneself that is aware of whatever one is thinking, feeling, sensing, or doing at that moment. Contact with the present moment on the other hand is essentially staying in the present moment by bringing one's awareness to what is going on around us and within us and consequently disengaging from an automatic pilot mode. Taking both the awareness and contact with the present moment together, this is the second cluster with the most number of responses are.

Acceptance and watching one's thoughts or defusion are the superordinate themes that make up the subtheme of opening up. Acceptance means opening and making room for painful feelings, sensations, urges, and emotions instead of resisting them or avoiding them. Defusion, the second of the core processes is stepping back and avoiding getting tangled up or being controlled by one's thoughts.

It is noteworthy that most of the responses of the participants registered under the subtheme of doing what matters. It can be said that this subtheme is an action-oriented theme. The least responses were under opening up which includes acceptance and defusion or disentangling from one's thoughts. Remember that all these six core processes are essential. The participants, specifically, and teenagers in general should not only gravitate towards one skill, in this case doing what matters. Skills of acceptance and watching one;s thoughts are equally important to learn so as to ensure that doing what it takes does not amount to avoidance.

Conclusion

Each teenager is unique, and it's important to respect their individual journeys. Initiatives of helping professionals should include individual interventions and systemic support whether locally or internationally, with or without the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainty has been characteristic of a teenager's life. This uncertainty inevitably has been exacerbated by additional situations brought about by the pandemic, which added to more risks of negative mental health outcomes. Stressful life events, extended home confinement, worry, and overuse of the internet and social media are factors and challenges that could influence the mental health of adolescents during this pandemic. It is imperative that teenagers receive the physical and mental care that they need to develop, grow, and thrive and to be psychologically flexible. Mental health and helping professionals should see to it that there are available resources for this population. Schools, colleges, and universities should also embed information and psychological interventions into the curriculum either implicitly or explicitly as we do not know when they would need these skills and we do not know for sure the skills that they have in their repertoire.

As a systemic effort, faculty, non-teaching staff, community members, and the home environment should be informed as well of the need to develop psychological flexibility. They need to be empowered to foster open communication. Teenagers should be encouraged teenagers to express their thoughts, concerns, and uncertainties openly. It is important that a safe space, a non-judgmental environment be established. It is also vital that teenagers be helped to gather information and explore different options related to their uncertainties. Teenagers should be encouraged to do reflection and have a better understanding of themselves. In the same way, teenagers should be encouraged to develop problem-solving skills, emotional regulation techniques, and effective coping strategies through but not limited to role modeling. They should be taught to embrace difficulties by guiding them and providing them with tools that they do not have yet in their system just so that they can manage stress and setbacks.

Uncertainty should be taught as something that comes naturally and that it should be seen as an opportunity. However, when stress and demands become unbearable, they should also be encouraged and supported to seek professional help. Each teenager is unique, and it's important to be patient, respectful, and supportive of their journeys as they go through uncertainties.

Acknowledgement

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