

# Mental Health of Korean Adolescents(註)

Jae Chang Lee

Hong Ik University

Adolescent mental health may be the most serious problem in Korea now. One of the most significant and characteristic mental health problems in Korean adolescents is so called "entrance examination stress syndrome." The entrance examination stress may be a basic cause of juvenile problems such as running away, drug abuse, and suicide. Korean adolescents are also experiencing deep feeling of alienation. The cause of adolescent mental disturbances in Korea can be found in the socio-cultural factors. Education, particularly higher education, has performed a major role to raise socio-economic status of people. Therefore, everybody wants to get a college diploma which would guarantee the social success, and putting themselves in the stressful situation. In order to solve the problems, education should not be used as a means to raise the social status, and more rational entrance examination system should be developed. In addition to these, school guidance and counseling programs should be strengthened.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Every society must somehow solve the problem of transforming children into adults, for its very survival depends on that solution" (Office of Science and Technology, Executive Office of the President, 1973, p. 1). As a matter of fact, educating and

guiding adolescents to be healthy members of the society is one of the most fundamental tasks of the society.

It goes without saying that the young will be in charge of leading this society in the future. Consequently, our future is entirely dependent upon present state of the young, particularly their mental health. To be sure, adolescents throughout history have been main concern of adult and society.

---

(註) 이 논문은 1993년 7월 일본의 동경에서 열린 '국제 건강심리학회'에 발표된 것임.

Even though people throughout history experienced the same biological changes as they became physically mature and achieved adult status, social and historical factors have had perhaps an even greater effect on the psychological development of contemporary adolescents (Haviland & Scarborough, 1981).

Contemporary adolescents are going along quite different paths from the adolescents of earlier periods. In particular, one of the most characteristic phenomena is the extension of the adolescent period. Due to social changes including the industrial structure, the extension of formal schooling periods, and a legal systems for adolescent welfare, adolescents are forced to go through a relatively longer period of economic and social dependence on their families than before. Besides these, due to rapid physiological development, puberty, which is regarded as the beginning of the adolescent period, starts earlier for contemporary adolescents than it did for those of earlier days. Thus the adolescent period begins earlier and ends much later than before.

During this period, adolescents remain as a marginal person who is neither a child any longer nor an adult yet. They are experiencing various psychological problems such as anxiety, confusion, conflict, and identity crisis due to their physical changes and the social change. Such an unstable status forces them to show more deviant behaviors and thus become a serious social problem.

In Korea, adolescent mental health problem, along with the juvenile delinquency, may be the most serious adolescent problem. The seriousness of juvenile delinquency is easily noticed by the general public, because this issue is dealt with by the mass media all the time. However, the extent and seriousness of mental health problem is rarely known to the public, because the problems are not only ignored but also covered up. Therefore, it is difficult to draw an attention from the government as well as general public. However, the state of mental health has a tremendous effect on person's behavior. In a sense, the juvenile delinquency may have a very close relationship with adolescent mental health. Consequently, the adolescent mental health problem may be more serious than juvenile delinquency.

Adolescence may be the most critical period in human development. Adolescence is a challenging and sometimes difficult stage of life, because of some characteristics experiencing in this period. Adolescence is above all a period of change-physical, sexual, psychological, and cognitive changes as well as changes in social demands. Many socialization demands, such as independence, changing relationships with peers and adults, sexual adjustment, educational and vocational preparation, are made at the same time that individuals are experiencing an almost unprecedented rate of biological maturation. Besides coping with all these

developmental changes, adolescents are struggling to achieve an identity of their own.

Such a nature of adolescence tend to put adolescents into a vulnerable situation of mental health, and psychological and psychophysiological disturbances of varying degrees of severity do occur. For some adolescents, the disturbance may be relatively minor and transient, for others, it may be severe and resistance to treatment.

The common adolescent mental disturbances may be anxiety reaction, depression, suicide, and eating disorders. These disturbances are also found in Korean adolescents, because adolescence has some universal characteristics. However, the type and extent of the disturbances shown by the Korean adolescents may be different from those found by adolescents from other societies.

In this paper, mental health states of Korean adolescents will be reviewed briefly, and "Kosambyung", the high school senior illness, will be focused. Because this syndrome, labeled as the entrance examination stress syndrome, may be the most serious and unique disorder for Korean adolescents. Then, after some causes of mental health problem are examined, some suggestions to enhance mental health of Korean adolescents will be proposed.

## I. CHARACTERISTICS OF KOREAN ADOLESCENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

A decade ago, a study (Kim, Won, Kim, & Kim, 1983), then first comprehensive study of this kind, drew some attention about mental health of Korean adolescents. The results of this study dealing with high school students in Seoul area indicated some idea of how serious the mental health problem of Korean adolescents. In this study, the subjects were classified into three groups; healthy group, borderline group who were mildly and/or transiently disturbed but did not need a professional help, and mentally ill group who were diagnosed as mental disorders needed a professional treatment. The research results showed that the healthy group occupied 46.4%, the borderline group 22.6%, and the mentally ill group 31.1%, respectively. According to this study, one out of three high school students in Seoul is in a very serious condition as far as mental health is concerned.

Prevalence rates were 1.05% in schizophrenia, 2.10% in affective psychoses, 4.21% in latent psychoses, 1.05% in psychoneuroses, 13.16% in personality disorders of non-sociopathic form, 3.16% in delinquent behaviors, and 6.31% in adjustment disorders. Besides the prevalence of psychiatric disorders, 89% of the students had one or more adaptational difficulties, especially in the areas of learning and associated future planning. Other areas such as conflicts with family members, financial difficulties and physical discomforts were

also frequently complained adaptational problems (Kim et al., 1983).

For 21 year period of 1968 and 1988, the number of adolescent patients hospitalized in a psychiatric clinic of major hospital in Seoul increased, while their age decreased (Lee, 1991). The cause of mental disturbances showed a tendency of moving from the family problems to school related problems, particularly school achievement. For instance, 46.4% of adolescent mental disorders were caused by the family problems during the period of 1968 through 1970. This proportion decreased from 33.5% in 1977-1979, to 24.2% in 1980-1981. On the contrary, the proportion of school problems kept increasing from 24% to 38%, and 44% during the same periods, respectively (Lee, 1983). This trend is reflected by the fact that the problems Korean adolescents were concerned most was school achievement (37.4%), followed by college entrance and career choice (19.8%), and family disturbances (18.0%) (Lee et al., 1981). They are still disturbed by the same problems after 10 years. A recent survey (Kwon & Kim, 1993) showed that school achievement (35.5%) and college entrance and career choice (28.2%) are major concerns of adolescents.

### III. KOSAMBYUNG

One of the most significant and characteristic mental health problems in Korean adolescents is so called "entrance

examination stress syndrome." This is called "Kosambyung" in Korean, which means the third grade (i.e., high school senior) illness. This is a syndrome shown by the students facing college entrance examination. This syndrome was recognized by many practicing psychiatrists and labeled around 1980 (Park, 1991). This syndrome indicates symptom of headache, vision disorder, stomachache, dizziness, insomnia, easy excitement by a minor stimulation, and destructiveness. In a more serious case, meaninglessness, eating disorder, and severe powerlessness are shown.

The entrance examination stress has become a basic cause of juvenile delinquency such as running away from home, drug abuse, and suicide. After examining adolescent patients hospitalized in the psychiatric ward of a major hospital in Seoul from 1981 to 1987, Lee (1988) found that entrance examination stress has a major effect on creating and worsening of adolescent mental disorders. The seriousness of entrance examination stress syndrome has been proved by the various statistics. Obsessive-compulsive reaction is found the highest among the high school students compared to middle school and college students (Lee, Lee, & Won, 1986). According to a recent study (Hwang, 1992), Korean adolescents experience stresses from school life (38.0%) most, followed by family life (21.0%), and personal habit and behavior (19.5%).

Academic underachievement (47.6%) is the major cause of stress in school, as well as in the family (27.9%). Health problem causing the stress most is poor eyesight (20.1%). Many Korean adolescents wear glasses because of poor eyesight caused by studying for entrance examination.

Persons who give adolescents stresses most are shown in the order of same sex friends (33.6%), teacher (17.2%), and father (15.1%). The physical symptoms displayed by the adolescents experiencing stresses are headaches, sleep disruptions, and neuroses (38.0%) (Hwang, 1992).

Another serious problem making matters worse is the person whom adolescents asking for help when needs occur. According to Hwang's study (1992), 66.3% of the adolescents go for help to friends, 11.9% to older siblings, 10.3% to mother, and only 0.7% of them turn to teachers for help. Teachers or counselors are the persons who can give needed professional help to the adolescents. However, students prefer going to their friends who are as immature as themselves. As one would predict, they do not get proper help from them and actually make problems worse.

The Kosambyung (entrance examination stress syndrome) also plays a significant role for adolescent suicide. According to the government report, 125 adolescents committed suicide in 1988 compared with 37 in 1986 and 50 in 1987, respectively. A recent study shows that 63% of the

adolescents had been tempted to commit suicide, while 20% had a very serious thought about attempting it. Among adolescents, 91% experienced stress from academic achievement, 73% worried about their school grades and career choice, and 61.5% with suicide caused by school grades. Accordingly, suicide is the second most common cause of death in adolescence, only next to the accidental death.

Therefore, Korean adolescents are also experiencing deep feeling of alienation. Korean adolescents are reported to be experiencing powerlessness in the world (68.6%), deciding life goals (36.4%), and school life (42.0%). They also display a feeling of meaninglessness in the world (63.9%) and school achievement (46.3%), because they cannot find the goals of life (37.7%) and studying is not everything for the life (34.7%), respectively.

As above mentioned, it can be understood that mental health problems of Korean adolescents are closely related to the school achievement and entrance examination.

#### IV. CAUSES OF ADOLESCENT MENTAL DISORDERS

Of course adolescence itself is a major contributing factor of adolescent mental disorders, the causes of adolescent mental disturbances in Korea can be found rather in the socio-cultural factors than in

personal characteristics.

Traditionally, Korean people have longed for a success in life which means becoming a high rank government official. However, this opportunity was restricted only to the "Yangban"(noble class), to whom education was allowed too. After the liberation from Japan in 1945, the opportunity of education was given to everybody and education has been regarded as a means to success in life. Education, particularly higher education, has performed a major role to raise socio-economic status of common people. Therefore, everybody wants to get a college diploma which would guarantee the social success. In addition to this, the government and major companies also prefer employing college graduates, and the salary gap between college graduates and high school graduates is still very wide, even getting closer lately by the effort of government and industries.

Contemporary Korean adolescents were born and have grown up during the period of early 70's and the beginning of 90's where the turmoil and drastic social changes occurred. They are the people who have been most significantly influenced by those changes. During these period, Korean society has experienced dramatic changes in political, economical, and socio-cultural aspects.

Korean society has become industrialized, urbanized, and middle class centered. In the political climate, the authoritarianism of

70's and 80's has been disappearing while representative democracy is rising. Higher education has been prevalent and population growth is stabilized. Nuclear family and equalization has become a main characteristic of family structure. The spread of mass media has been very drastic. Printed media have been replaced by electronic and visual media. Drastic industrialization, urbanization, and mass media have made Korean society a mass society. Korean society has also become a part of international community (Lim, 1993).

These changes have been responsible for the malfunctioning of the Korean family, school, and society, which have had a significant influence on the mental health of Korean adolescents.

## 1. Transition of the Korean Family

Discussion of the family naturally gives rise to strong, complicated, and often contradictory feelings. The family has provided us with some of our most intense emotional experiences. Man begins his life in the family, and the family functions as the first socialization agent. Therefore, the family has a tremendous influence on shaping a person. Freud's claim that human personality is formed by the age of 5 or 6, as well as Bloom's comment that children reach 50% of their adult intelligence level by the age of 4, demonstrate the significant ,

function of the family early in life.

The family has an influence on an adolescent's personal growth and behavior in various ways. First, the socio-economic status and structure of the family tend to have an influence on the development of adolescents. Intelligence, personality, and sociability are influenced by the socio-economic status as well as cultural environment of the family. Second, the parenting style or child-rearing style of the parents and interpersonal relations between the adolescent and other family members also influence the adolescent's personality and behavior.

First of all, due to the industrialization of society which allows more social mobility, the Korean family is also transiting to the nuclear family: the size of the family is getting smaller and the family is becoming isolated from its neighbors. For the last 30 years in Korea, the number of families increased by 72% while the population increased by 51%, and average number of family members decreased from 5.66 in 1960, 4.85 in 1980, to 4.0 in 1990. The proportion of nuclear family reaches over 70% of the entire family.

The spread of nuclear family has weakened educational function of the family. In the traditional large family, other family members such as grand parents, uncles, and aunts could take the place of the parents. These members could perform educational functions when parents were not available.

Actually the great portion of values, attitudes, life styles, and etiquettes were taught in the family by various members. However, in the nuclear family, such members do not exist any more.

Second, in the modern society more chances to get higher education are given to women before, and more women tend to have a job. This means that less mothers stay home to take care of their children. It is ironical that mothers are needed more in the family now than before, but more mothers leave home.

Third, in the rapid changing environment, parents are experiencing value conflict. The parents themselves do not have clarified values, and cannot show consistent values to their children. This puts adolescents in a very unstable circumstances.

Fourth, the authority of parents are getting weaker. The extent of parental influence on their children are getting less.

Fifth, parents' overprotection of their children spoils them. The overprotecting way of bringing up their children makes them lacking of ability to control their needs and impulses, and also makes them a weak person who cannot adjust to the environment.

Sixth, parents' over expectation puts adolescents in a stressful situation. Nowadays, parents do not have many children as they used to have before. Therefore, parents expect more from fewer

children. This situation makes children really unhappy and stressful.

## 2. Stressful School Environment

Even though education played a major role in the economic and social development of Korea, education also has been blamed for adolescent mental health. Some of the blames of school education requiring more attention are as follows:

First, there has been a misunderstanding of school education. The purpose of school education has been regarded as a preparation process for advancing to a school of a higher grade. Consequently, school education has been negligent in developing student's creativity, ability, autonomy, and other affective factors.

Second, school environment is inhumane and uneducational. The average number of students per classroom is over 52 for middle schools and over 54 for the high schools. The student-teacher ratio is also high. The number of students per teacher is around 30 for middle schools and around 35 for high schools, much higher than other countries such as Taiwan, Japan, Mexico, United States, and Great Britain. Even though the government requires middle school with more than 12 classes and high school with more than 9 classes to have a certified guidance counselor, only 42% of middle school and 58% of high school have a certified guidance counselor. Moreover, 84.

5% of these counselors teach more than 16 hours a week.

There are not enough facilities for leisure of extracurricular activities to fulfill adolescents' needs. Because the main purpose of education has been teaching subject matters, leisure activities and extracurricular activities have been neglected. Therefore, neither the program for these activities nor the facilities have been on a priority list for school planning.

All the circumstances mentioned above have an influence on the students' school life and their expectation of the school, and eventually, their way of thinking, behavior, and life style. Because the purpose of education and the school curriculum focus on teaching subject matter, students tend to perceive their teachers only as a transmitter of knowledge, rather than as a person they can talk to when they have personal problems

## V. SUGGESTIONS

In order to enhance mental health of Korean adolescents some suggestions are proposed as follows:

First, the purpose of education should be clarified. The purpose of education is not simply to teach subject matter and convey information or to transmit cultural heritage. The purpose of education should be to help develop the individuality of each and every student, to develop his potentialities



whatever they might be, to help him become, to the fullest extent possible, what he is capable of becoming. Education should not be regarded as a simple means to get a diploma. Education should not be treated as a success symbol. Education is a purpose by itself.

Second, the selection system such as college entrance examination should be reconsidered. There should be more diverse methods of screening applicants with an emphasis of individuality of students and autonomy of the university.

Third, the curriculum and instruction of school education should be changed from teacher-centered instruction for delivering information to developing the student's potentialities and student-centered instruction.

Fourth, the school guidance program should be strengthened. During the adolescence, youngsters experience various conflicts and confusions. Therefore, a support system for these students is required to help solve their problems and to help them live a healthy and meaningful life. Career guidance service, as well as psychological counseling including various preventative programs, should be provided. In this period peers are likely to have more influence than parents or teachers in some aspects, therefore, some type of peer facilitating program also needs to be developed and applied.

Fifth, all the teachers should interact

with students as if they were counselors. Each teacher should have the attitude and function of a counselor who cares about each student's problems and pays attention to each student. A teacher should be trained with the basic counseling and interpersonal communication skills. A close working relationship between teachers and counselors should also be maintained.

Sixth, school environment should be improved. The physical environment of the school should be improved, and facilities for leisure of extracurricular activities should be provided. Also the student-teacher ratio should be reduced, so that students and teachers can have close personal relationship.

Seventh, educational function of the family should be recovered. The most influential environment for the adolescent's mental health is the family. The parents should understand the family is also responsible for the adolescent's mental health. A family program such as a parent education program should be developed and implemented.

Last but not least, a healthy social environment, where all the adults love and care about adolescents as their own children, should be established.

## REFERENCES

- Haviland, J. M., & Scarborough, H. S. (1981). *Adolescent development in*

- contemporary society*. New York: D. Van Nostrand.
- Hwang, J. K. (1992). Mental health of Korean adolescents. In K. D. Ahn, J. K. Hwang, H. R. Kim, Y. S. Lee, & Y. S. Park (Eds.), *The current states and problems of adolescent culture* (pp. 385-535). Songnam: The Academy of Korean Studies.
- Kim, K. I., Won, H. T., Kim, E., & Kim, M. J. (1983). A mental health survey among high school students in Seoul(1). *Mental Health Research*, 1, 1-40.
- Kwon, I. J., & Kim, M. J. (1993). *Survey of the values and lives of Korean adolescents*. Paper presented at the seminar of the Samsung Welfare Foundation.
- Lee, J. C., Park, B. K., Yoo, H. K., Choi, K. S., & Koh, J. Y. (1981). *A comprehensive diagnostic study of Korean adolescents*. Seoul: Korean Educational Development Institute.
- Lee, K. H. (1983). Adolescent mental health in modern society. *New Education*, 35(4), 73-79.
- Lee, K. H. (1988). Psychiatric study of entrance examination stress syndrome. *Neuropsychiatry*, 27(3), 441-463.
- Lee, K. H. (1991). *Adolescent mental disorders in Korea*. Paper presented at the Spring Conference of the Korean Neuropsychiatric Association.
- Lee, M. K., Lee, C. H., & Won, H. T. (1986). *The preliminary study on standardization of Leyton obsessive-compulsive reaction scale*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Korean Psychological Association.
- Lim, H. S. (1993). *Socio-cultural characteristics of Korean adolescents*. Paper presented at the seminar of the Samsung Welfare Foundation.
- Office of Science and Technology, Executive Office of the President. (1973). *Youth: Transition to adulthood*. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- Park, J. S. (1991). Mental health and mental disorders of adolescents. In Korean Society of Lifelong Education (Ed.), *Lifelong education and adolescent education* (pp. 153-180). Seoul: Korean Society of Lifelong Education.

# 한국 청소년의 정신건강

이재창

(홍익대)

오늘날 한국 청소년의 정신건강 문제는 가장 심각한 청소년 문제중의 하나이다. 특히 소위 고3병이라고 불리는 입시 스트레스 증후군과 같은 입시와 관련된 장애가 심각하다. 청소년들의 가출, 비행, 약물남용, 자살 등도 입시 스트레스와 관련이 있는 것으로 나타났다. 청소년들은 또한 세상과 학교 생활에 대해서 심한 무력감을 가지고 있으며 심한 소외감을 경험하고 있는 실정이다. 이러한 청소년 정신질환의 원인은 한국의 사회문화적 특성이 크게 작용하고 있다고 할 수 있다. 학위 즉 대학 졸업장을 통한 사회적 지위 상승에 대한 욕구가 입시경쟁을 유발하고 청소년들로 하여금 입시 스트레스를 경험하게 하는 결과를 가져왔다고 할 수 있다. 이러한 문제를 해결하기 위해서는 교육이 더 이상 신분상승의 수단이 되어서는 안되고, 합리적인 입시제도가 마련되어야 하며, 학교의 생활지도와 상담활동이 강화되어야 한다.