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Relationship with Parents, Symptoms of Depression and Internet Addiction among Adolescents During the Pandemic Period

Abstract

The research presented in this article aimed to answer the following question: *what is the role of social support and quality of family relationships in the context of depressive symptoms and abuse of the Internet during the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning by adolescents?* The study was conducted among 619 adolescents aged 11–15. The survey questionnaire was constructed from standardized research tools. The study showed that 40.0% of the students who took part in the study had increased depressive symptoms. Heavy Internet use affected 16.0% of the respondents, and there was 9.2% of those who had aggravated symptoms of depression and addiction at the same time. Simultaneously, it was noted that girls, compared to boys, were more often found among adolescents experiencing symptoms of depression. Students belonging to the group with depressive and addictive symptoms experienced significantly more difficulties in their relationships with family members (mothers and fathers) compared to the group without symptoms. Students displayed less severity of depressive symptoms if there was mutual understanding and openness to alternative views and beliefs in their family. The results proved that the quality of family relationships is the most important for the normal functioning of adolescents without depressive symptoms, also in a pandemic situation.

Key words: mental health in youth, COVID-19, family relationships, depression, Internet addiction

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Problem of the Functioning of the Youth

Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed an increase in depressive symptoms and Internet abuse among individuals. A report titled *Symptoms of depression and anxiety among Poles during the COVID-19 epidemic. Longitudinal study report* by Małgorzata Gambin and her co-workers, found that symptoms of depression and generalized anxiety disorder were linked to challenges experienced at home, such as difficult relationships with family members, lack of privacy, and fatigue from excessive responsibilities (Gambin et al., 2020). These symptoms were also associated with anxiety and uncertainty related to the pandemic spread. Furthermore, anxiety about COVID-19 was connected to Internet addiction disorder, involving intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts (Servidio et al., 2021). Heavy Internet use was found to exacerbate depressive symptoms (Zalewska et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new challenges for children and adolescents. Researchers developed several questionnaires to identify stressors associated with functioning during this period, helping to determine the primary difficulties experienced by young individuals. According to the report *Tenure in the network 2.0* (involving 806 students aged 11–18), 62% of surveyed adolescents reported sleep problems, 43% had thoughts of death, 75% worried about the future, and 70% felt more nervous and agitated than before (Białecka & Gil, 2020). The report *Youth during the pandemic* (involving 2476 individuals aged 15–19) revealed an increase in the number of young people experiencing loneliness, school-related stress, depression, suicidal thoughts, and cyberbullying during the pandemic (Grzelak & Żyro, 2021). Another report, *Remote education: what has happened to students, their parents, and teachers?* (involving 1284 participants), indicated that around 10% of the young people surveyed exhibited distinct symptoms of depressive states, with 9% reporting persistent sadness and loneliness. Additionally, 9% acknowledged feeling like crying all the time. Poor relationships with peers, remote learning, and isolation were considered contributing factors to these challenges (Białecka & Gil, 2020; Ptaszek et al., 2020; Grzelak & Żyro, 2021).

The research presented in this article aims to answer the following question: what is the role of family relationships in the context of depressive symptoms and

Internet abuse among adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning? Given the complexity of the inter-relationships between the variables analyzed, the study is primarily exploratory.

Methodology of Research

The research was conducted in May 2021 among adolescents aged 11–15, with a sample of 619 respondents. Those surveyed attended schools located throughout Poland. The surveys took place with the permission of the school principals, took place during lessons conducted by remote learning, via an electronic form accessible via the Internet; taking part in the study was anonymous and voluntary.

The aim of the study

The aim of the study was to diagnose and describe (Babbie, 2001) the prevalence of symptoms of depression and/or Internet addiction among adolescents aged 11–15. It was assumed that this age group is one of the most vulnerable to the negative effects of, on the one hand, pandemic structures and the need to study at home and spend more time with parents, and on the other hand, the need to use new tools for learning and interacting with peers/teachers, i.e. fulfilling part of social needs in a way mediated by new technologies. The survey was conducted a little over a year after the introduction of the epi-demographic condition in Poland and internationally, i.e. at a time when the fear of possible contagion had diminished, but adolescents were tired of the restrictions and the need to learn remotely.

Research question

The study sought to answer the question to what extent symptoms of depression and/or Internet addiction declared by adolescents correlate with positive attitudes of a mother and father towards a child. Standardized questionnaires were used to assess symptoms of depression and the level of Internet addiction, as described below, while a tool developed by Solecki was used to diagnose the relationship with parents.

Methods

The method used in the study was the survey method. The following survey questionnaires were used in the study:

a) *Questionnaire for the Diagnosis of Depression in Children and Adolescents (CDI 2)*

The original version of the questionnaire was developed by Kovacs (2003). Its Polish adaptation was made by Wrocławska-Warchala & Wujcik (2017). In the presented study, an abbreviated self-report version was used, which consists of 12 questions relating to various symptoms of depression. Out of 3 possible statements within each question, the respondents were asked to choose the one that reflected their feelings over the past two weeks. An example question implies the following possible responses: I do most things well; I do many things badly; I do everything badly. The scale has satisfactory reliability ratings. For respondents aged 7–12, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$, while for those aged 13–18, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$.

b) *Internet Addiction Test (IAT)*

The original scale (Internet Addiction Test – IAT) in an abbreviated version of 8 questions was prepared by Young (1998). It has been adapted for learners aged 16–17 by Solecki (2016). In his research, the scale obtained a satisfactory reliability index of Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$. An example item of the scale reads: *do you feel the need to spend more and more time using the Internet in order to achieve the desired degree of satisfaction?* Those completing the questionnaire were asked to answer yes or no to each question. This answer was to be based on their own experience of using the Internet.

c) *Questionnaire for the study of relations with parents (Solecki 2016;2021)*

Consisting of 18 items assessed using a 5-point scale (*never, rarely, sometimes, often, always*) and relating separately to relationships with a mum and dad (Solecki, 2016).

d) *Demographic data*

The responders were also asked to provide information about their age and gender, and in which grade of primary school they study. We decided to use convenience sampling which is a non-random sampling method of selecting respondents due to their accessibility and proximity. The sample formed using this method is called a convenience sample. The advantage of the convenience sampling is that it allows to identify relations between the phenomena (Christensen, Johnson, 2011).

Results of Research

Of those taking part in the survey, a slight majority were women (53.2% of respondents). Nearly 90% (86.1%) were rural residents, while 13.9% of the respondents lived in a city. The teenagers participating in the study were studying in sixth (33.8%), seventh (29.4%) or eighth (36.6%) grade. They were therefore 11–15 year olds. Among the respondents, 16% declared high rates indicating Internet addiction. The remaining respondents (84%) report low levels of Internet addiction.

The analysis of the collected data shows that of the respondents, half show “average” symptoms of depression (50%) and 16% of respondents declare “very high” rates of depression, 8% “high”, 16% of respondents have “elevated” rates, while one in 10 respondents declare “low” symptoms of depression. Based on the data collected, 4 subgroups were identified from the respondents: (1) Depression and Internet Addiction, (2) Depression, (3) Internet Addiction and (4) No symptoms.

The analysis shows that more than one in five respondents in this group show symptoms indicating that they suffer from depression. Nearly one in ten students report having symptoms of both depression and Internet addiction. Internet addiction alone is characteristic of 7.1% of respondents. Slightly more than 60% of respondents did not indicate symptoms indicating that they had depression and/or Internet addiction.

Of 329 girls taking part in the survey, 28.3% declared the presence of symptoms indicative of depression. In contrast, 10.3 per cent had test results indicating that they were suffering from depression and were addicted to Internet use. In this group, 6% of the respondents were addicted without symptoms of depression.

Considering the declarations of the boys, the majority (71%) on the basis of the obtained declarations are “normal”, less than 13% (12.8%) experience depression, while 7.9% experience depression and Internet addiction. Addicted to this medium, without symptoms of depression, are 8.3% of the respondents. It is therefore noteworthy that Internet addiction and depression symptoms are overrepresented among girls – there are significantly more girls than boys in the addiction/depression and addiction groups.

The study also examined the extent to which a positive/negative relationship with a parent correlates with symptoms of depression and/or Internet addiction. A test used in the study was developed by Solecki (2016; 2021). In this test adolescents were asked to respond to 18 statements about their relationship with their mum and dad, and mark the frequency of the respective behaviours. The items that tested positive relationships with a mum/dad were, for example: #2: *She/He supports me in developing my talents*; #5 *We agree together on my plans for the future*; #14 *She/He accepts that I don't have to be the best/best at everything*; #18 *I enjoy spending time with her/him*. Against each statement, the respondents were asked to specify the frequency (*never – rarely – sometimes – often – always*).

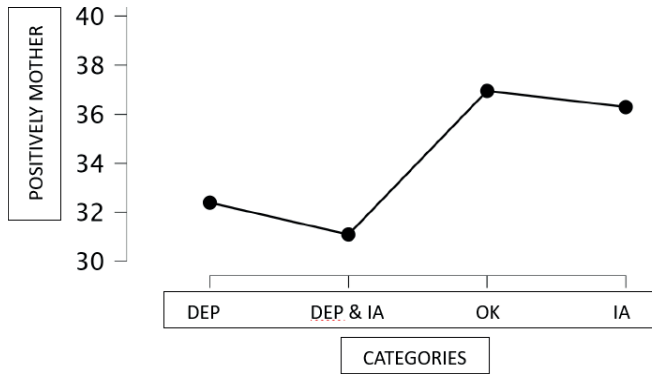


Figure 1. Positive relationship with a mother (test score) vs. depression (DEP), depression and Internet addiction (DEP&IA), adolescents without symptoms of depression and addiction (OK) and Internet addiction (IA)

Source: Own work.

The results show that the best results in the questionnaire about the relationship with parents were achieved by adolescents who did not show Internet addiction and Internet addiction together with depression or depression alone in other tests (referred to in the study as “Teens without symptoms”) (mean in the test 36.954, coefficient of variation 0.166, SD 6.122). However, the relationship with a mum scores were only slightly lower among adolescents who scored as indicative of Internet addiction on the IAT test (mean – 36.295, coefficient of variation 0.187, SD 6.805). In contrast, the relationship with their mother among adolescents who struggle with depression is worse than in the groups analysed above (mean on the test 32.392, coefficient of variation 0.256, SD 8.287) (Figure 1, Table 1). Thus, the test results indicate lower support from a mother. The subgroup of adolescents who are addicted to the Internet and also struggle with depression performed worst on this test (31.088, coefficient of variation 0.308, SD 9.560).

Table 1
 Values of Depression and Internet addiction, Depression, Internet Addiction and Without symptoms of depression and/or Internet addiction with the relation with a mother

Categories	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of Variation
Depression and Internet Addiction	57	31.088	9.560	1.266	0.308
Depression	130	32.392	8.287	0.727	0.256
Internet addiction	44	36.295	6.805	1.026	0.187
Without depression and/or Internet addiction	388	36.954	6.122	0.311	0.166

Source: Own work.

Regarding the relationship with a dad, the averages in the test were slightly different – adolescents scored significantly lower in this test than when analysing the relationship with a mum, meaning that they have a less positive relationship with their dad and less support from their dad (Figure 2, Table 2). The worst relationships with a dad are declared by young people who suffer from depression (mean in the test 28.008, coefficient of variation 0.355, SD 9.951; for a mum 32.392). Similarly, low scores in the relationship with a father were obtained by students who are addicted to the Internet and show symptoms of depression (mean on the test 29.053, coefficient of variation 0.383, SD 11.130; cf. relationship with the mother – 31.088). For students with an Internet addiction, the mean of the test on the relationship with a dad was 33.591 (with a coefficient of variation of 0.213, SD 7.170; cf. relationship with a mum – 36.295), while for students without symptoms of addiction and/or depression it was 34.077 (coefficient of variation of 0.25, SD 8.507; cf. relationship with a mum – 36.954). The results, therefore, show that adolescents who experience depression have a significantly worse relationship with their father than adolescents without symptoms of depression and/or Internet addiction. This means that adolescents in crisis experience less support from their father than from their mother (relationship scores with their mother are higher). Perhaps fathers do not cope with the difficult emotions experienced by their children, especially daughters (as the results of the analyses show – in all groups: Depression – Internet Addiction – Depression and Internet Addiction – there are more girls than boys).

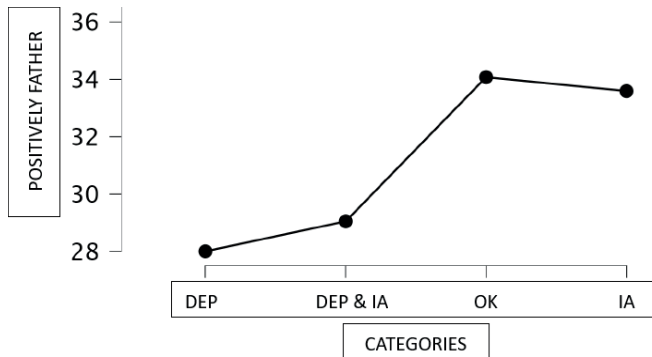


Figure 2. Positive relationship with a father (test score) vs. depression (DEP), depression and Internet addiction (DEP&IA), adolescents without symptoms of depression and addiction (OK) and Internet addiction (IA)

Source: Own work.

It is clear that in order for teenagers to cope with difficulties such as depression or Internet addiction, support from professionals is needed, but also a good atmosphere in the family home and support from both parents.

Table 2

Values of Depression and Internet addiction, Depression, Internet Addiction and Without symptoms of depression and/or Internet addiction with the relation with a father

Categories	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of Variation
Depression and Internet Addiction	57	29.053	11.130	1.474	0.383
Depression	130	28.008	9.951	0.873	0.355
Internet addiction	44	33.591	7.170	1.081	0.213
Without depression and/or Internet addiction	388	34.077	8.507	0.432	0.250

Source: Own work.

The ANOVA results reveal the existence of a relationship between positive parental attitudes, symptoms of depression and Internet addiction among students. In the case of mum's positive attitude, the ANOVA test explains 9.5% of the variance in the results, while in the case of a dad, the amount of explained variance is smaller at 7.9% (see Table 3).

Table 3

Positive mother's and father's attitude versus groups experiencing specific difficulties; results of ANOVA

Positive attitudes	1. OK <i>n</i> = 388	2. DEP <i>n</i> = 130	3. DEP&IA <i>n</i> = 57	4. IA <i>n</i> = 44	Differences between groups			<i>Post hoc</i> ^a <i>Gamesa-Howella</i>
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>F</i> _(3, 615)	<i>p</i>	η^2	
Mother	36.95 (6.12)	32.39 (8.28)	31.08 (9.56)	36.29 (6.80)	21.58	< .001	0.095	2-1,4; 3-1,4
Father	34.07 (8.50)	28.08 (9.95)	29.05 (11.13)	33.59 (7.17)	17.63	< .001	0.079	2-1,4; 3-1

Annotation. OK – group without symptoms; DEP – group with depression; DEP&IA – group with depression and Internet addiction; IA – group with Internet addiction.

^a The table lists the groups between which there were statistically significant differences.

Source: Own work.

Statistical inference was further complemented by post hoc multiple comparisons. These made it possible to assess the significance of the differences between the groups in the assessment of the respondents' relationship with their parents. Table 3 details the statistically significant differences between the separate groups and the variables studied. The results indicate that a positive relationship with a mother is

associated with the absence of depressive symptoms of the students. No significant differences were found between the group without difficulties and the group with symptoms of Internet addiction alone in terms of the assessment of mother's positive attitude towards the children. A similar picture of interdependence is also found with regard to the respondents' relationships with their fathers.

Discussion & Conclusions

Adolescence is a period of major changes in psychological and somatic aspects, opening up to new experiences and building a personal identity. An important role in this process is played by new technologies, which are very popular among young people as a means of promoting social relationships and freely exploring the 'wider world'. However, the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and the austerity associated with it, as well as the need to use new technologies to satisfy needs that have hitherto been met without the mediation of the virtual world, is challenging young people.

The study presented here obtained results that lead to the following conclusions:

1. The proportion of young people who experience depression, Internet addiction or both depression and Internet addiction in a COVID-19 pandemic situation is high. More research is needed to determine whether this percentage of adolescents experiencing problems now – in the post-pandemic reality – has decreased or increased.
2. Girls are statistically more likely to experience symptoms of depression or depression and Internet addiction. In the case of Internet addiction, on the other hand, there are still more cases in the girl population than in the boy population, but the differences are not so significant. The reason for these significant gender disparities in the distribution of traits indicative of Depression/ Internet Addiction/Depression and Internet Addiction should therefore be investigated.
3. Those experiencing Depression/ Internet Addiction/Depression and Internet Addiction have poorer relationships with both their mum and dad. However, rates of positive relationships with a mum are higher than rates of these relationships with a dad. This means that a mum is more likely to be the person who provides support and cares more about the teenager in crisis.
4. The results of the study indicate that a positive relationship with a mother is associated with the absence of depressive symptoms in students. However, they do not rule out dependency. A similar picture of interdependence is also found with regard to the respondents' relationships with their fathers. The analyses further showed that the experience of positive attitudes on the part of a mother

by the respondents has a slightly higher correlation with depressive symptoms than is the case in relation to the relationship with a father.

Numerous research results show that relationships with parents and parental attitudes are correlated with Internet use (cf. Mróz & Solecki, 2017). Furthermore, the research by Niedorys and colleagues (2018) showed that approximately one in ten adolescents is addicted to the Internet. In this group, one in five students is raised in a single-parent family. Furthermore, recurrent conflicts with parent(s) are significantly more frequent in the group of adolescents who are addicted to the Internet or are at risk of addiction – however, there is a lack of systematic research on the causes of Internet addiction or whether the adolescent’s addiction leads to the emergence of family conflicts. Other studies, on the other hand, have shown that lack of a positive bond with a mother, low availability of a mother in a crisis situation, correlate with the rate of Internet addiction (Trumello et al., 2018).

The study by Kilińç and colleagues (2019) showed that Internet addiction occurs on every continent and in almost every social group. The research also showed that in a pandemic situation, young people had a need for support especially from family and teachers (Gawrych, Cichoń, Kiejna, 2023). Relating this to the results of the presented research, it can be concluded that the lack of support and positive relationships with parents may be a cause, rather than an effect, of seeking solutions to their problems in virtual reality.

Researchers focus on the social support of young adults as a factor in reducing the occurrence of mental health problems. Qi and colleagues (2020) showed that low levels of support were associated with an increase in the prevalence of depression. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, there is a lack of studies that have made correlations between symptoms of depression, addiction and depression and addiction among young adults and support/relationship with their parents. This opens up the possibility for further exploration and a more in-depth research.

Limitations and Further Research

Like any survey, the presented one also has its limitations. First of all, the research sample was not representative, but such a sample is difficult to obtain in social research. It should also be remembered that the survey research is based on the declarations of the people participating in the study – their subjective perception of reality, which is a certain limitation of social research carried out in this paradigm.

In order to delve deeper into the issue under analysis, further research should be carried out – taking the COVID-19 pandemic situation out of context as a factor – to determine what the cause and effect in the relationship with a mum/dad is, and

the occurrence of symptoms such as depression, boarding school addiction or both depression and addiction. It is also important to look for protective factors against the occurrence of the indicated phenomena, and to find out how parental support/ positive relationships with a mum and dad can protect adolescents from depression and addiction crises.

Scientific Research on “Exploring of Psychological Well-being of young people in remote learning” received the positive decision of Ethics Commission of Pedagogical University of Krakow DNa.0046.1.7.2023

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Roman Solecki, Anna Mróz

Relacje z rodzicami a objawy depresji i uzależnienia od Internetu wśród młodzieży w okresie pandemii

Streszczenie

Badania, których wyniki zaprezentowano w artykule, miały na celu odpowiedź na pytanie: jaka jest rola wsparcia społecznego i jakości relacji rodzinnych w kontekście objawów depresji i nadużywania Internetu w czasie pandemii COVID-19 oraz uczenia się na odległość wśród młodzieży?

Badanie przeprowadzono wśród 619 nastolatków w wieku 11–15 lat. Kwestionariusz badania został skonstruowany w oparciu o wystandaryzowane narzędzia badawcze. W badaniu wykazano, że u 40.0% uczniów biorących udział w badaniu wystąpiły objawy depresji. Intensywne korzystanie z Internetu dotyczyło 16.0% ankietowanych, a u 9.2% osób występowało jednocześnie nasilenie objawów depresji i uzależnienia od Internetu. Jednocześnie zauważono, że wśród adolescentów częściej stwierdzano objawy depresji u dziewcząt w porównaniu z chłopcami.

Nastolatki należą do grupy z objawami depresyjnymi i uzależnienia od Internetu doświadczali istotnie większych trudności w relacjach z członkami rodziny (matkami i ojcami) w porównaniu z grupą nastolatków bez objawów. Adolescenci wykazywali mniejsze nasilenie objawów depresyjnych, jeśli w ich rodzinie panowało wzajemne zrozumienie i otwartość na alternatywne poglądy i przekonania.

Wyniki wykazały, że jakość relacji rodzinnych jest najważniejsza dla prawidłowego funkcjonowania młodzieży bez objawów depresyjnych, także w sytuacji pandemii.

Słowa kluczowe: zdrowie psychiczne młodzieży, COVID-19, relacje rodzinne, depresja, uzależnienie od Internetu

Roman Solecki, Anna Mróz

Relación con los padres y síntomas de depresión y adicción a Internet entre adolescentes durante el período de pandemia

Resumen

La investigación presentada en este artículo tuvo como objetivo responder a la siguiente pregunta: ¿cuál es el papel del apoyo social y la calidad de las relaciones familiares en el contexto de síntomas depresivos y abuso de Internet durante la pandemia de COVID-19 y el aprendizaje remoto entre adolescentes?

El estudio se realizó entre 619 adolescentes de entre 11 y 15 años. El cuestionario de la encuesta se construyó a partir de herramientas de investigación estandarizadas. El estudio mostró que el 40.0% de los estudiantes que participaron en el estudio tenían un aumento de los síntomas depresivos. El uso intensivo de Internet afectó al 16.0% de los encuestados, y hubo un 9.2% de los que presentaron síntomas agravados de depresión y adicción al mismo tiempo. Al mismo tiempo, se observó que entre los adolescentes que experimentaban síntomas de depresión eran más frecuentes las niñas que los niños.

Los estudiantes pertenecientes al grupo con síntomas depresivos y adictivos experimentaron significativamente más dificultades en sus relaciones con los miembros de la familia (madres y padres) en comparación con el grupo sin síntomas. Los estudiantes mostraron menos gravedad de los

síntomas depresivos más leves si había comprensión mutua y apertura a puntos de vista y creencias alternativos en su familia.

Los resultados demostraron que la calidad de las relaciones familiares es lo más importante para el normal funcionamiento de los adolescentes sin síntomas depresivos, también en situación de pandemia.

Palabras clave: salud mental en jóvenes, COVID-19, relaciones familiares, depresión, adicción a Internet

(Translated by Lucia Lozano Garcia)

Роман Солецкий, Анна Мроз

Отношения с родителями и симптомы депрессии и интернет-зависимости у подростков в период пандемии

Аннотация

Главной целью исследований, представленных в статье, является ответ на вопрос: какова роль поддержки в обществе и качества семейных отношений в контексте симптомов депрессии и злоупотребления Интернетом во время пандемии COVID-19, а также удалённой учёбы?

Исследование проводилось среди 619 подростков в возрасте 11–15 лет. Анкета разработана согласно стандартным инструментам исследования. Исследование доказало, что у 40.0% учеников, принимающих участие в исследовании, усилились симптомы депрессии. Активное использование Интернета касалось 16.0% опрошенных, а у 9.2% появилось одновременно усиление симптомов депрессии и зависимости. Одновременно замечено, что среди подростков чаще были обнаружены симптомы депрессии у девушек, чем у парней.

Ученики, принадлежащие к группе с симптомами депрессии и зависимостями, испытывали больше трудностей в отношениях с членами семьи (матерями и отцами) в сравнении с группой, в которой этих симптомов не было. Если у учеников в семье было взаимопонимание и открытость к альтернативным убеждениям и взглядам, то у учеников симптомы депрессии были выражены меньше.

Результаты показали, что качество семейных отношений является важнейшим фактором для отсутствия симптомов депрессии у молодежи, в том числе во время пандемии.

Ключевые слова: психическое здоровье молодежи, COVID-19, семейные отношения, депрессия, интернет-зависимость

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