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Personal Correlates of Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder in Young Adults

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Abstract

Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder (ASAD) is an anxiety condition marked by strong fear or anxiety related to being apart from attachment figures. Although it's often linked to childhood, ASAD can continue into young adulthood, significantly affecting education, career growth, and personal relationships. Recognizing the personal factors related to ASAD in young adults is vital for accurate diagnosis and effective treatment. These factors include various psychological, behavioral, and situational elements that are specific to this stage of life, where greater independence and responsibility are common. Understanding these unique aspects is essential to address the challenges faced by individuals with ASAD in their young adult years.

Keyword: Anxiety, Adult Separation, Disorder, attachment, emphasize

Introduction

Separation Anxiety Adult Separation Disorder (SAD) is often seen as a childhood issue marked by intense fear or anxiety about being away from key people. However, it is increasingly recognized that this disorder can also continue into adulthood or begin anew, especially in young adults facing major life changes. Symptoms of adult SAD include ongoing anxiety about leaving home or being apart from loved ones, worry about their safety, unwillingness to be away from home, fear of loneliness, and distress when anticipating or experiencing separation. It is important to understand the factors related to SAD in young adults to aid in accurate diagnosis and effective treatment. These factors include a combination of temperament, personality traits, thinking patterns, attachment styles, and other mental health issues that may be present. Recognizing these elements is essential for achieving better outcomes for those affected by the disorder.

Insecure Attachment Styles and Adult Separation Anxiety

Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder (ASAD) is closely linked to insecure attachment styles, especially anxious attachment. This relationship stems from early interactions with caregivers, as attachment theory suggests that how we view ourselves and others in relationships is shaped in childhood. Young adults with an anxious attachment style often have a strong need for closeness, a fear of being abandoned, and an active response to separation or the thought of it. They frequently experience high levels of anxiety about their relationships, worrying a lot about how available and responsive their partner is.

For example, a young adult with ASAD and a high anxious attachment score may frequently text their partner during the day, panic when their partner is not reachable, or resist moving out of their parents' home despite being able to do so financially. These actions reflect a belief that loved ones will eventually leave or be unreliable, a fundamental aspect of anxious attachment that leads to distress during separations.

Additionally, avoidant Disorder attachment can also relate to ASAD, although it may appear differently. Individuals with avoidant attachment may suppress their feelings but may still face challenges. They can struggle with unstable relationships or not develop good coping strategies. This can lead to becoming overly dependent on a new attachment figure when entering a significant relationship. Overall, both anxious and avoidant attachment styles contribute to the experience and expression of ASAD in young adults.¹

Temperament and Neurobiological Predispositions

Individual differences in temperament, which are seen as biologically based personality traits that develop early, play a key role in the symptoms of Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder (ASAD) in young adults. High levels of behavioral inhibition, marked by caution, shyness, and fear in new situations, are strongly related to anxiety disorders, including Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD). Young adults with high negative emotionality and a low threshold for distress in new or uncertain situations are more likely to see separation as a threat instead of a manageable situation.²

ASAD might involve changes in the brain circuits that detect fear and threats, particularly those involving the amygdala and its links to the prefrontal cortex. While there are fewer neuroimaging studies specifically focusing on adult SAD compared to generalized anxiety disorder, the known sensitivity to threats in anxiety disorders suggests that young adults with ASAD may have an increased sensitivity to cues of separation, interpreting the absence of a close relationship as a serious danger. This heightened reactivity, alongside a lower ability to regulate emotions, sets the stage for panic related to separation. Young adults showing these temperament traits are at a greater risk for experiencing anxiety when facing separation because they tend to react negatively to stress.³

Cognitive Factors: Maladaptive Schemas and Catastrophic Thinking

The experience of separation anxiety in young adults is greatly influenced by their cognitive beliefs and schemas, which often stem from past experiences of threat or neglect. Common schemas, like abandonment, defectiveness, and emotional deprivation, are frequently seen in clinical cases of anxiety related to separation. For example, a young adult with an

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abandonment schema might expect to be left alone or unsupported, causing intense anxiety before any separation occurs.

In addition to these core beliefs, the thought processes that arise during separation play an important role. Catastrophic thinking, which is when a person continually expects the worst possible outcome, is a key characteristic. For instance, a young adult might think, "If my partner is away for two days, something bad will happen to them, or they will want someone else." This pattern of automatic negative thinking increases physiological responses, similar to a panic attack, solely based on the anticipation of being apart from someone. As a result, this reinforces their tendency to avoid separation whenever possible. Thus the cognitive frameworks built from early experiences heavily shape how young adults view and react to separation, commonly leading to heightened anxiety and emotional distress.⁴

Comorbidity and Coping Mechanisms

Co-occurring mental health conditions and the type of coping strategies used play an important role in the severity and persistence of Attachment Separation Anxiety Disorder (ASAD) in young adults. ASAD often appears alongside other mental health issues, such as Panic Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, and Major Depressive Disorder. For instance, when a young adult faces panic attacks triggered by being alone, they may develop a fear of being alone, which complicates their situation further.

The coping mechanisms a person uses can influence how their anxiety develops. Ineffective coping strategies, like seeking excessive reassurance, worrying about threats, or using substances to cope with feelings during separation, can keep anxiety ongoing. On the other hand, effective coping methods—such as developing a strong sense of self, using problem-solving skills to deal with brief separations, and engaging in comforting activities—are linked to lower levels of symptoms.

A young adult who has developed a strong sense of self and does not rely heavily on their main attachment figure is less likely to suffer from overwhelming distress during separation. The text emphasizes the importance of understanding how these factors, including mental health conditions and coping strategies, can affect young adults dealing with ASAD, highlighting that the combination of mental health issues is common and often complicates treatment and recovery.⁵

Identity Development and Autonomy Challenges

Young adulthood is a vital stage focused on developing a solid sense of identity and gaining independence from primary caregivers. Issues related to ASAD (Attachment and Separation Anxiety Disorder) often stem from challenges faced during this crucial developmental phase. Young adults with lasting ASAD typically struggle with identity diffusion, relying heavily on external figures such as partners and parents for their self-identity and emotional stability. Their self-worth is often tied too closely to the presence and approval of these attachment figures. As a result, the absence of support is not seen as just a temporary situation; instead, it feels like a serious threat to their self-identity.

These individuals often find it hard to be alone or to engage in independent activities, like following hobbies or creating a strong social circle outside of their attachment figures. This

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indicates a lack of personal autonomy. Many case studies reveal young adults who postpone moving out of their family homes until their late twenties or who quickly blend their identities in relationships. They fear that trying to establish their own identity will lead to abandonment. This merging of identity needs with attachment needs significantly contributes to the persistence of ASAD.⁶

young adulthood requires individuals to develop a firm identity and become more self-reliant. However, young adults facing ASAD often encounter difficulties in achieving this, showing over-dependence on others for their identity and emotional support. Their self-esteem is closely linked to these attachment relationships, making separation feel threatening. This connection hampers their ability to enjoy solitude or independently engage in social activities. Many cases illustrate that these struggles delay life milestones like moving out, as young adults merge their identities too quickly out of fear of loneliness or rejection. The intertwining of their identity and attachment needs reinforces the challenges associated with ASAD.

Conclusion

Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder (ASAD) is linked to several personal factors. Key issues include insecure attachment patterns, especially an anxious type that makes individuals prone to worry about being abandoned. Certain personality traits, like a tendency towards high behavioral inhibition, combine with cognitive weaknesses. These might include negative thinking about abandonment and viewing separation as catastrophic. Young adults may struggle to establish their own identity, which can make them dependent on others for emotional support. To effectively treat ASAD in this age group, approaches should go beyond simply exposing individuals to separation. Treatment needs to focus on changing negative thought patterns, building strong therapeutic relationships, and helping young adults develop a sense of independence. This includes creating a self-concept that can handle temporary separations without distress. Understanding the complex personal connections involved is crucial to lessen the significant difficulties ASAD causes during an important time of life.

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