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Developing soft skills to cope with adolescent anxiety: An interdisciplinary perspective

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Abstract

Managing stress in children and adolescents requires an understanding of the adaptive nature of the stress response and the development of soft skills. In today's increasingly stressful world, understanding the evolutionary basis of stress is critical. Contrary to traditional beliefs, stress does not necessarily hinder development; rather, it can guide and shape it. Soft skills—categorized as interpersonal, intrapersonal, and extrapersonal—are essential for effective stress management. A wide range of interventions is available, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), parenting programs, and social skills training, with an emphasis on integrated approaches. Finally, the role of early recognition and timely intervention by educators and health professionals, as well as the creation of a supportive environment, is crucial. This review contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexity of stress and the identification of effective strategies for its management.

Keywords: Anxiety, Soft Skills, Adolescence, School, Interventions

1. Introduction

In a period of heightened demands and competitive attitudes, younger individuals face greater pressure and more significant potential consequences. Developmental psychologists often examine the effects of life experiences on an individual's development and formation, but they rarely examine how these effects are structured by natural selection. Over the past two decades, theory and research in the field of adaptive calibration of stress responses have come to recognize that, in most species, a single "best" strategy for survival and reproduction is unlikely to evolve. This is because the "best" strategy varies depending on the physical, economic, and socio-emotional characteristics of one's environment (Crawford & Anderson, 1989) [17]. As a result, a strategy that promotes success in some environmental contexts may lead to failure in others (Ellis & Boyce, 2008; Meaney, 2010) [21, 39]. This adaptive perspective challenges the prevailing view (Beauchaine *et al*., 2007; Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2001; El-Sheikh *et al*., 2009; Evans & Kim, 2007) [6, 14, 22, 24] that childhood exposure to stress and adversity impairs normal development (i.e., causes dysregulated biological and behavioral functioning). Rather, both stressful and supportive environments have been part of the human experience throughout our evolutionary history, and so our developmental systems have been shaped by natural selection to respond adaptively to a diverse range of environmental contexts. When people encounter stressful environments, this does not so much disrupt their development as direct or regulate it towards strategies that are adaptive to such conditions. In contrast, when people encounter well-resourced and supportive environments, it directs or regulates development towards strategies that are adaptive to these contexts (Ellis *et al*., 2011a [20], 2011b; Flinn, 2006 [28]).

The fluidity and rapidly changing reality of the era leads to the necessity to develop soft life skills that help modern youth to effectively manage various issues of a personal, professional and social nature. Skills are part of a holistic concept of competence, which includes the mobilization of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to meet complex demands. These can be acquired through education and the accumulation of experiences. As trends such as globalization and the advancement of artificial intelligence change the demands of the labor market and the skills required for the success of workers, people must rely even more on their unique (so far) human capacity for creativity, responsibility and the ability to "learn to learn" throughout their lives

(Magno, 2010) [38].

2. Materials and Methods

The approach of this paper is mainly descriptive and analytical. It is based on a literature review, aiming to record, categorize and evaluate the major theoretical and empirical perspectives about soft skills and stress management in adolescence. The study focuses on the analysis of scientific publications dealing with the international and Greek literature, focusing on the articles published in the last twenty years, which examine stress in adolescents and related interventions in and outside the school context. At the same time, it reviews the most important types of interventions that have been evaluated as effective in the psychological empowerment of adolescents.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of soft skills in stress management during adolescence, as well as to present effective interventions that can be applied in the school and family environment. Through a literature review, the work seeks to underscore:

- The nature and forms of expression of stress in adolescents,
- The basic categories of soft skills (intrapersonal, interpersonal, extrapersonal),
- The value of early intervention and the effectiveness of various therapeutic and educational strategies, with the ultimate goal of strengthening the mental resilience of adolescents and creating a supportive framework by parents, teachers and specialists.

2.1 Search strategy and inclusion criteria for studies on child and adolescent mental health

Data was collected using a search of scientific databases of Google Scholar, PubMed, ERIC and Scopus, with keywords such as: anxiety in adolescents, soft skills, stress coping, school-based programs. The inclusion criteria for sources included: (a) recency of the publications, (b) relevance to the area of child and adolescent mental health and (c) the scientific integrity of methodologies used in primary research. Further, the sources' validity and reliability were evaluated through a rigorous examination of the sources' content.

2.2 Literature review of the categorization and educational value of soft skills

In a world that is changing at a rapid pace, education must foster in students the capacity to act with both intelligence and compassion. People use terms like "21st-century skills" to describe not only cognitive abilities—often measured by test scores and grades—but also the attitudes and dispositions that young people will need to thrive. These attitudes, sometimes unique or newly emerging, are increasingly seen as essential components of being a well-educated person (Evans, 2008) [25]. The importance of soft skills depends on the context and individual perception. However, communication skills are a common denominator. Communication skills include many aspects, with interpersonal and intrapersonal skills involving transactions between people that can be developed and are essential for successful interactions in personal and professional contexts. Interpersonal skills involve direct interactions between individuals, while intrapersonal skills involve self-reflection and internal dialogue. Studies examining student success characteristics reveal that both are instrumental in facilitating successful interactions among students (Tiyas, 2014; Renner *et al*., 2016; Macklem, 2020) [47, 44, 37].

Interpersonal relationships are fundamental to various aspects of a student's development and successful integration into society. They are essential for students to renew their ideologies and facilitate their transformation from "individuals" to "community members." To cultivate beneficial interpersonal relationships, students are advised to engage in several key actions. These include making friends with diverse individuals, avoiding excessive expectations of themselves and others, treating the vulnerable with kindness, and interacting with those in authority in a balanced manner—neither arrogantly nor condescendingly. Students should also strive to magnify the strengths of others while ignoring their weaknesses, respect others' personalities, and manage their moods effectively. Furthermore, building mutual trust and caring for others, along with paying attention to self-images and understanding the psychology of those with whom they communicate (Zhang, n.d.) [54].

In addition, there is the Spiritual Quotient (SQ), an extrapersonal skill (Wibowo *et al*., 2020) [50]. SQ, also known as spiritual quotient, is increasingly recognized as a vital extrapersonal skill for students, contributing to their overall well-being and academic success. SQ involves the awareness and expression of innate spiritual qualities such as love, peace, and purity, which help students remain stable and adapt to changes in life. It is associated with happiness, academic achievement, and the development of moral and ethical values. This form of intelligence is not only beneficial for personal development but also for promoting a harmonious society (Raheja *et al*., 2024) [42] (Table 1).

Table 1: Categorization of soft skills, presenting their main categories and subcategories, with important components and examples for each subcategory, as well as the interconnections between them

Soft Skill Category	Subcategory / Description	Key Elements / Examples	Relationship with Other Categories
Communication Skills	A general category encompassing various aspects.	- Verbal and Non-verbal communication - Active listening - Clarity of expression - Negotiation	Form the foundation for interpersonal skills.
Interpersonal Skills	Skills used in interactions with other people.	- Empathy - Collaboration - Conflict management - Relationship building	A specialization of communication skills at an interpersonal level.
Intrapersonal Skills	Self-regulation skills.	- Self-awareness - Self-control - Time management - Stress management - Adaptability	Relate to an individual's internal management.
Extrapersonal Skills	Spiritual Intelligence (SQ).	- Trust in oneself and others - Care for oneself and others - Ethics and values	Connected to the spiritual and ethical dimension.

2.3 The study of soft skills for managing with childhood anxiety

Stress is a natural phenomenon for young people, associated with any change, internal or external, positive or negative, that a young person must adapt to (Fig 1). It is defined as anything that causes physical or mental distress, but it can also be motivating (Fetro, 2000; Bhargava & Trivedi, 2018) [26, 8]. When stress becomes intense or prolonged and interferes with daily life, it may indicate an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are characterized by excessive or persistent anxiety, including panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Kessler, 2005; World Health Organization, 2020) [34, 52]. Adolescents may be more vulnerable to anxiety due to biological changes that occur during adolescence, which can lead to more intense or prolonged anxiety experiences (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) [1].

Adolescence is a time of change for adolescents and their families, a transitional period from childhood to adulthood. During this transitional period, changes in physical, cognitive, emotional, and sexual characteristics can both excite and frighten adolescents as they find themselves caught between childhood and adulthood (Wehmeier, Schacht, & Barkley, 2010; Contrada, 2011) [49, 16]. Dysfunctional social relationships, in some cases, can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression in adolescents. Failure to form and maintain constructive relationships with others is one of the problems that limit their effectiveness and hinder the development of healthy character, the cultivation of their talents, and their mental and emotional growth (Carter, 2004) [12].

Statistics show that student anxiety, as an unpleasant emotion stemming from fear of the future, is related to everyday experiences and challenges at school, at home, in the community, and within the peer group. Examples of stressors include bullying, social isolation, dissatisfaction, body image, school difficulties, and unsafe neighborhoods (Fitzgerald, & O'Brien, 2018; Arnett, 2019; Breinbauer, Kuster, & Zimmermann, 2019) [27, 4, 10]. Continuous or unresolved stress can lead to anxiety, depression, irritability, decreased concentration, aggression, physical problems, fatigue, sleep disturbances, and unhealthy coping strategies, such as smoking and substance use (Fetro, 2000; Furukawa *et al*., 2013) [26, 30]. Therefore, learning stress management skills is beneficial for both youth and adults. Recognizing the causes of stress and expressing related emotions, combined with learning practical techniques, is an effective tools for reducing stress (Essel & Owusu, 2017) [23].

Stress management skills can be developed in students with appropriate training and support. Teachers play a crucial role in this process, creating a positive and supportive school environment, encouraging communication, and cultivating a climate of trust between students and teachers. In addition, they can help students understand the nature of exam anxiety, its effects and how to cope with it effectively. These include classroom discussions, providing information and advice, and most importantly, encouraging the development of practical strategies, such as relaxation techniques (deep breathing, muscle relaxation, meditation), healthy eating and exercise, as well as healthy ways of managing thoughts and emotions. Providing guidance and opportunities to practice these strategies is also crucial (Gonzaga *et al*., 2022; Tompkins, 2023) [31, 46].

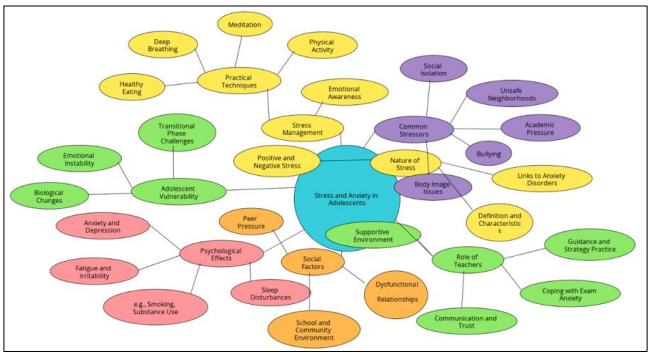

Fig 1: A holistic diagrammatic presentation of the spectrum of anxiety in adolescents—from causes and symptoms to coping strategies and the role of the school environment

2.4 Forms of manifestation and causes of anxiety in children and adolescents

Anxiety in children and adolescents manifests itself in a variety of ways, often influenced by a combination of genetic,

environmental, and developmental factors (Calancea, 2024; Kong, 2024) [11, 35]. It is characterized by symptoms such as worry, lack of confidence, and emotional instability, which can significantly affect a child's social and school life. School-related stressors, including interactions with teachers and peers, can intensify these symptoms, leading to avoidance behaviors and low self-esteem. Authoritarian communication styles from teachers, inconsistent demands, and negative relationships can further aggravate anxiety. In addition, disruptions in parent-child relationships undermine the child's sense of security, leading to increased anxiety and avoidance behaviors (Calancea, 2024) [11]. Understanding the causes and manifestations of anxiety is crucial for early detection and intervention (Witkin, 1999; De Anda *et al*., 2000; Murberg & Brud, 2007) [51, 18, 40]. One in four people report experiencing an anxiety disorder at some point in life, with a common onset in childhood. Anxiety disorders are characterized by worries, phobias, negative beliefs, avoidance of situations, and physical symptoms (e.g., increased heart rate, shortness of breath, sweating, stomach or chest pain) (Table 2). Panic attacks—the sudden onset of intense fear accompanied by physical and cognitive symptoms—are also a common symptom. Common features of anxiety disorders include overestimation of threat, underestimation of coping ability, and negative impact on various areas of life (Cefai *et al*., 2022) [13]. Stress can worsen health problems and lead to depression. A study of elementary school students showed sleep problems (29.7%), decreased appetite (17.5%), headaches (17.1%), and stomachaches (11.1%), while approximately 50% of pediatric visits are due to psychosomatic symptoms (Lohaus *et al*., 1997).

Table 2: Detailed listing of the most common symptoms of anxiety in children and adolescents

Symptom Category	Symptom	Description	Observations/Indications
Emotional	Worry/Anxiety	Constant feeling of worry or anxiety, without apparent cause.	Excessive worrying about future events, difficulty relaxing.
	Fear/Panic	Fear of things that usually don't cause fear, possible panic attacks.	Sudden sensations of intense fear, rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, dizziness.
	Irritability/Anger	Increased irritability and tendency towards anger.	Intense reactions to minor stimuli, difficulty managing anger.
	Difficulty Concentrating	Difficulty concentrating at school or in other activities.	Inability to focus, absentmindedness, decreased school performance.
	Sadness/Depression	Feelings of sadness, disappointment, or despair.	Persistent sadness, loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed.
	Withdrawal	Avoidance of social contact with friends and family, tendency towards isolation.	Reduced desire for socialization, preference for solitary activities.
Behavioral	Sleep Changes	Difficulty sleeping, frequent awakenings during the night.	Insomnia, nightmares, restless sleep.
	Appetite Changes	Increase or decrease in appetite for food.	Overeating or anorexia.
	Headaches/Stomachaches	Appearance of headaches or stomachaches without apparent physical cause.	Frequent complaints of physical pain, especially before stressful situations.
	Difficulty Sleeping (repeated)	Appearance of difficulty sleeping.	The repetition is due to the original list provided.
	Bedwetting/Thumb Sucking	Return to behaviors typically seen at a younger age.	Possible regression to previous developmental stages due to anxiety.
	Separation Anxiety	Difficulty separating from parents or caregivers.	Intense worry and discomfort during separation.
	Reactive/Disobedient Behavior	Increased reactivity and difficulty with discipline.	Intense reactions to rules and boundaries, temper outbursts.
Physical	Fatigue	Feeling of continuous tiredness and weakness.	Lack of energy, difficulty performing daily activities.
	Muscle Tension	Tightness in the shoulders or back.	Muscle aches, feeling of tightness in various parts of the body.
	Weak Immune System	Increased frequency of illness.	Frequent infections, colds.

2.5 Literature review of stress management interventions

Stress management interventions are key therapeutic approaches that aim to alleviate symptoms of anxiety and enhance students' well-being. These interventions can take a variety of forms, including cognitive-behavioral strategies, arts-based activities, and wellness therapies. The effectiveness of these approaches has been supported by research, indicating their potential to promote a healthier academic environment. Early recognition and intervention are crucial for preventing serious mental disorders (Ng *et al*., 2023) [41]. It is essential that pediatric healthcare professionals (HCPs) possess the necessary expertise to recognize, assess, and manage anxiety disorders (Bobbit *et al*., 2023) [9]. Scientists from psychology and medicine have explored the topic, proposing interventions based on the type and intensity of the event, age, gender, personality, socioeconomic environment, duration, and source of stress, as well as their effectiveness (Riva & Chinyio, 2018) [43]. Effective interventions for adolescent mental health combine parenting programs, leisure activities, and a balanced educational program, adapted to national, community, and school contexts. Cultivating resilience (through strong parent-child relationships and positive peer interactions), promoting help-seeking, and providing self-help programs facilitate early detection and intervention. Most evaluated interventions showed positive short- and medium-term results (Floresku *et al*., 2019) [29].

Cognitive Bias Modification (CBM) is a relatively new intervention that aims to improve thinking and decision-making, based on the idea that thinking biases lead to poor decisions. CBM interventions can be used in education, but further research is needed on their long-term effectiveness

(Hertel & Mathew, 2011) [32]. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a safe and effective treatment for anxiety in children and adolescents (Hofmann *et al*., 2012) [33]. Other interventions include social skills training (SST), metacognitive therapy, psychosocial support, participation in sports and structured play, focused school resilience interventions, group assertiveness training, short-term psychoanalytic psychotherapy (STPP), brief psychosocial intervention (BPI), and self-advocacy. Emerging approaches are also being developed, such as Guided Parent Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (GPD-CBT) (Floresku *et al*., 2019) [29] (Table 3).

Table 3: Overview of available interventions for anxiety: From early recognition to specialized treatments and structured programs

Intervention Category	Description	Goal	Effectiveness
Early Identification and Intervention	Recognition and management of anxiety disorders by pediatric healthcare providers (HCPs)	Prevention of severe mental disorders	High, when done promptly
Parenting Programs	Parental involvement in supporting children's mental health	Strengthening parent-child relationships	Positive short-term and medium-term results
Recreational Activities	Participation in physical activity, music, sports	Improvement of mental health and resilience	Effective in national, community, and school settings
Cognitive Bias Modification (CBM)	Improving thinking and decision-making by modifying thinking biases	Reduction of problematic behaviors	More research needed for long-term effectiveness
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	Therapy to reduce anxiety symptoms	Reduction of anxiety in children and adolescents	Safe and effective
Social Skills Training (SST)	Development of social skills through education	Improvement of social interactions	Positive results
Metacognitive Therapy	Therapy focusing on thinking about thinking	Improvement of self-awareness and anxiety management	Effective
Psychosocial Support Intervention	Support through psychosocial interventions	Improvement of mental health	Positive results
Organized Sports Participation	Participation in sports activities	Improvement of physical and mental health	Effective
Voluntary Outdoor Play	Participation in outdoor play	Reduction of anxiety and improvement of mood	Positive results
School-Focused Resilience Intervention	Interventions to strengthen student resilience	Improvement of resilience and anxiety management	Effective
Group Assertiveness Training	Training in assertive behaviors through groups	Improvement of self-confidence and social skills	Positive results
Short-Term Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy (STPP)	Brief psychoanalytic therapy	Reduction of anxiety and improvement of mental health	Effective
Brief Psychosocial Intervention (BPI)	Brief interventions for psychosocial support	Improvement of mental health	Positive results
Self-Help	Provision of self-help programs	Enhancement of self-management of anxiety	Effective
Guided Parent Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (GPD-CBT)	Therapy that includes parents in the process	Reduction of anxiety through parental support	Effective

The effectiveness of comprehensive mental health programs in schools, especially in managing student anxiety, has been well-documented, with increased social-emotional competence and improved mental health outcomes (Cefai *et al*., 2022) [13].

These interventions, whether individual or group-based, include:

- **Behavioral Therapy**: Developing coping skills such as relaxation techniques, logical thinking, and time management.
- **Psychoeducation**: Promoting understanding of anxiety and strategies for its management.
- **Play-Based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT-AT)**: A short-term, focused intervention for younger children, designed to help them understand and modify negative thoughts and behaviors.
- **Medication**: Prescribed exclusively by specialists in cases of severe symptoms.

In addition to professional interventions, parents and educators can create a supportive environment by encouraging children to express their feelings freely and by cultivating gentle stress management skills.

Researchers are developing age-appropriate prevention and treatment interventions tailored to children's needs, such as improving social skills or reducing behavioral problems. Combination interventions—such as those reported by Floresku *et al*. (2019) [29], which include parenting programs, leisure activities, and a balanced educational program—are particularly effective in promoting adolescent mental health. A combined approach involving psychotherapy and parent training has also been shown to be effective. One study demonstrated that combining parent training with relaxation techniques was more effective than parent training alone in reducing stress symptoms.

Many researchers are exploring integrated approaches that combine relaxation techniques, cognitive strategies, and social support (Zisopoulou & Varvogli, 2022) [53].

While stress management interventions are beneficial, some argue that they may not address underlying systemic issues contributing to student stress, such as academic pressure and limited institutional support. This perspective underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that incorporate both individual coping mechanisms and structural institutional changes (Belaise *et al*., 2010) [7].

3. Conclusions and Discussion

This study highlighted childhood and adolescent anxiety as a multifactorial and dynamic phenomenon that does not solely manifest as a pathological reaction but, at times, as an adaptive strategy of the organism in response to environmental demands and changes. A review of the relevant literature makes it clear that anxiety in adolescents is closely linked to biological, psychosocial, and environmental variables. Interpreting the phenomenon through an evolutionary lens reveals that stress, under certain conditions, can play a functional role by shaping survival strategies and psychological resilience, rather than being purely a disruptive developmental factor.

It is therefore imperative to adopt a holistic and multidimensional framework in addressing anxiety, within which soft skills constitute a fundamental pillar. Their classification into intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal categories allows for a more comprehensive understanding of their role in stress management. Skills such as self-regulation, emotional intelligence, communication, collaboration, and spiritual development significantly enhance young people's ability to respond to everyday challenges in a healthy and constructive manner, reducing the pathological expression of anxiety.

Some of the most promising developments in stress management are the emerging methods for addressing it. These approaches are most effective when grounded in well-established theoretical frameworks and applied consistently. Among the most beneficial are Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), parenting programs, social skills training, and general psychosocial support. Evidence suggests that combining multiple strategies—such as relaxation techniques with psychotherapy, parental education, and school-based interventions—can significantly enhance the long-term effectiveness of these efforts.

It's really crucial to catch early symptoms and act quickly, and that means everyone—parents, teachers, and mental health experts—needs to be on board. Schools play a vital role in this, offering preventive support that can make a huge difference. Universal mental health programs help boost students' social and emotional skills, foster positive relationships, and build their psychological resilience.

Ultimately, it becomes evident that the successful management of anxiety during adolescence cannot focus solely on individual interventions but requires the coordinated activation of the family, school, and broader social environment. The cultivation of a supportive climate, the strengthening of soft skills, and the destigmatization of mental health difficulties form an essential framework for promoting the mental well-being of young people. It is therefore recommended that soft skills education be incorporated into school curricula and that educators receive training to effectively fulfill their crucial role in the prevention and management of adolescent anxiety.

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