

# Qualitative Phenomenological Study: Understanding the Experience of Adolescents' Mental Health Problems in Urban Areas

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Adolescence is referred to as a period of "storm and pressure" or "storm & stress". At that time, emotional tension increased as a result of physical, glandular, and hormonal changes. This condition causes them to experience stress to mental health problems. Adolescents who experience mental health problems will have a serious impact on adulthood. This study aims to explore mental health problems (stress) experiences from the perspective of adolescents.

**Method:** The method used in this research was qualitative, with a phenomenological approach, and the participants were adolescents aged 15-18 years. The research employed purposive sampling, with 12 participants. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, with each interview lasting 30-60minutes. Thematic was used for data analysis.

**Result :** The result shows that the experience of mental health problems related to stress begins in elementary school, junior high school, and senior high school. Stress is the most common among adolescents, categorized as low, moderate, and high. It is based on the PSS (Perceived Stress Scale) instrument. Determinants include family factors, individual factors, academic factors, relationship factors, and the social environment in which adolescents live. Coping mechanisms include both positive and negative responses to stress.

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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical and formative period during which individuals begin the transition from childhood to adulthood. Ensuring that adolescents receive full support in every aspect of life, including mental health and welfare, is crucial to fostering this transition and laying the foundation for a healthy and productive adulthood. Adolescents are individuals with a biological age typically ranging from 13 to 19 years.(1) Mental health conditions represent a significant disease burden for adolescents globally.(2) In 2019, an estimated one in seven adolescents experienced a mental disorder. The estimated number totals 166 million adolescents worldwide, comprising 89 million males and 77 million

females. More than 1 billion people worldwide live with a mental health disorder, with anxiety and depression being the most common. Mental disorders are the leading cause of disability worldwide, accounting for approximately 20% of all disabilities. An estimated 1 in 5 children and adolescents has a mental disorder. More than 50% of mental disorders begin before the age of 14.(3) Stress is one of the common mental health problems. It can happen to anyone, including adolescents. They have a high risk of stress due to puberty. Stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension caused by difficult situations. It is a natural human response that pushes us to handle challenges and threats in our lives.(4) (5) Depression and anxiety are highly prevalent among

15-29-year-olds. In Indonesia, approximately 61% of young people with depression have thoughts of suicide, but only a small number seek help. Approximately 3.7% (9 million) of people suffer from depression, out of a population of 250 million. Approximately 6% (14 million) of people aged 15 and over suffer from mood disorders such as depression and anxiety. Approximately 1.7 per 1,000 people suffer from chronic psychological disorders, such as schizophrenia.(6)

Mental health problems, such as emotional disorders, an increase in cases in East Java, occurred around 0.5 per thousand. These results indicate that cases of mental health problems and emotional disorders are still one of the types of diseases or health disorders that consistently increase from year to year. Surabaya is one of the biggest cities with a high risk of mental disorders in East Java. Surabaya is the second-largest city in Indonesia after Jakarta. The population of Surabaya in 2023 reached 3 million people, with a population growth rate of 0.42% in 2023.(7) Based on data from the Surabaya City Health Office in 2016, 26.7 percent of visitors to health services were patients with mental disorders. A total of 100,319 people with mild and severe mental disorders were registered using health services, both at health centers and hospitals.(8) The rise of adolescent gangsters in Surabaya is due to low parental supervision.(9) This is also one of the mental health problems that needs to be monitored. There is no specific data on the number of stress cases among adolescents in Surabaya. However, data from Menur Mental Hospital (RSJ) shows an increase in the number of mental health cases treated for children and adolescents, with 4,765 cases treated throughout 2023 and 3,000 in the first seven months of 2024.(10) Stress in adolescents can be triggered by various factors, including academic pressure, concerns about the future, bullying, family problems, and issues such as insecurity and social pressure.

Addressing mental health issues in Surabaya is crucial because they impact a person's quality of life, social relationships, and productivity. This issue is also crucial for preventing more severe disorders, reducing stigma in society, and increasing awareness and the courage to seek professional help. Good mental health also supports physical health and allows individuals to develop optimally. Mentally healthy individuals are better able to cope with stress, enjoy life, and have greater self-confidence. Furthermore, it can help individuals build stronger relationships with family, friends, and the community. Another benefit is improved well-being.

Mental well-being is closely linked to physical health. People with good mental health tend to be more active, get enough rest, and concentrate better. Furthermore, people with good mental health are more able to work productively and contribute to society. And, more importantly, it can prevent more serious problems. Addressing symptoms of mental health issues early can prevent them from developing into more serious mental disorders. Therefore, it is crucial to address adolescent mental health issues to prevent further deterioration. This research aims to explore the experiences of mental health (stress) in adolescents aged 15-18 years old in Surabaya.

## METHOD

### Study Design

The research method is a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach. The research locus is in Surabaya, separated into 4 areas include east, west, center, north, and south. The research focuses on the experiences of mental health, specifically stress, in adolescents aged 15-18 years. The research was conducted from April to August 2023 and included 4 steps: collecting data, reducing and category data, analyzing, and displaying data.

### Participants and Setting

The sampling determination for this research used purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria for the research were living in Surabaya  $\geq 10$  years, actively enrolled as high school students, or directly involved with adolescents or adolescent programs. Additionally, participants had to have handled mental disorders in adolescents, such as stress. Exclusion criteria included participants who were unwilling to participate in the research, resigned during the study, or changed their residence location, and participants who had been diagnosed with a mental disorder. The sample size was determined by data saturation, widely accepted as a methodological principle in qualitative research. Data saturation is defined as the point during coding when researchers find that no new codes are emerging from the data.(11)(12) The research included 7 adolescent informants and 5 supporting informants who had experience in assisting and addressing adolescent issues. The supporting informants comprised 2 teachers/tutors, a psychologist from the Public Health Center, and a certified individual from the Surabaya City Teen Health Service.

**Table 1.** Semi-structured in-depth question and purpose of question

Question	Purpose of the question
Can you tell me about your experience with mental health issues you have experienced?	To explore the experiences of mental health problems that adolescents have felt and experienced
Can you describe the causes of the mental health issues you have experienced?	To explore determinants of mental health issues which may include internal or external factors
Can you tell me what you did to manage the mental health issues you have experienced?	To explore the efforts and abilities of coping mechanisms faced that adolescents face
Can you share your experience accessing information about other mental health issues? What was the content of the information? Where did it come from?	To explore access and availability of information obtained by adolescents
Is there an urgency for assistance in addressing/managing mental health issues? What kind of assistance? To whom?	To explore the involvement of parents, peers and healthcare professionals in adolescent effort to cope with mental health issues

### Data Collection

This research used semi-structured interviews as a data collection method. The interview guidance was developed carefully and comprehensively to explore the adolescents' experiences (Table 1). The data collection technique used was in-depth interviews. Document studies were also carried out using the annual report of the health center health service as a source, the annual report and health profile of Surabaya, the annual report of the public health center, news and activity report, and activity report in Surabaya through the Surabaya official website. The purpose of these document studies was to explore government programs aimed at supporting the mental health of adolescents. In-depth interviews are conducted face-to-face, online, or via personal phone calls, according to the participants' preferences and availability. The supporting instrument used is a guided in-depth interview. Each interview is conducted once, but if the data obtained are insufficient, the researcher conducts further interviews to deepen the information. The location of the interviews is based on the participants' comfort, such as schools, parks, or cafes. All interview processes are carried out directly by the researcher using a voice recorder and field notes. Each interview session lasts for 30-60 minutes. Data collected from the interviews are in audio format and are anonymously coded. The data collection period is from 15 May 2023 to 15 June 2023.

### Analysis Data

The data analysis used thematic analysis. The data analysis process involved transcribing the audio recordings verbatim into Indonesian. Verbatim transcription was completed within 24 hours after the interview process. Subsequently, coding was conducted according to themes. The themes identified included adolescents' experiences with mental health issues, determinants of mental health problems (such as stress)

experienced by adolescents, coping mechanisms for stress, and the urgency of assistance in addressing mental health problems. Theme analysis was obtained from combining information from teenagers as the main participants and supporting informants consisting of teachers, tutors, and adults. Grouping of themes based on information and determination of codes and coding from informants refers to words or sentences that are often spoken and have meanings that are relevant to stress. An analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 for organizing, management, and the thematic analysis process.

### Trustworthiness

To ensure the accuracy and reliability of research that encompasses four aspects: (1) Credibility, where the researcher has extensive interview experience and establishes a relationship of trust and harmony with the interviewees before the interview. In addition, qualitative researchers review the consistency of the text and units of meaning, as well as summarize its content. (2) Transferability: the content of the interview is presented appropriately in the text. Data were collected from adolescents, healthcare professionals/program holders, teachers, and tutors to provide extensive information, comparisons, and richness in the data. (3) Dependability: The data collection is conducted by the researcher using in-depth interview techniques and transcribing the audio verbatim into text. (4) Confirmability: All notes, texts from interviews, and analysis files are fully preserved.(13)

The trustworthiness of this research was in triangulation of sources, which involves different information sources or informants, including adolescents, parents, teachers, and healthcare workers (Psychologists from the public health center and certified personnel of Health Service Adolescents of Surabaya City).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Characteristic Informants

The characteristic refers to characteristics that show, tell, reveal, distinguish, or typical conditions of an individual's character.(14) Table 2 shows that informants in this research are around 16-18 years old and have an education in high school. For additional informants, there are 5 people with statuses such as teachers, tutors, heads of adolescents' mental health programs, and psychologists from the public health center. Table 3 explains the themes, categories, and coding from the qualitative results on the mental health problems (stress) of adolescents in Surabaya.

### Thematic Analysis

Table 3 shows the results of the thematic analysis of the research. Four themes emerged from the qualitative research: Experience of Adolescents with Mental Disorder, Determinants of Mental Disorder (Stress) Experienced by Adolescents, Ability of Coping with Stress, and Urgency for Help in Handling Mental Disorder. Table 3 clearly illustrates the themes, categories, and coding of the research.

### The Experience Stress of Adolescents

Based on a qualitative study, it can be concluded that every adolescent is going through stress, but they have different levels of stress. The theme, "The Experience of Stress of Adolescents," describes the stress experienced by adolescents. It covers the first time they experience stress, the various factors that can cause it, and adolescents' responses to the stress they experience. The stress that adolescents go through can occur during

elementary school, junior high school, or senior high school. Most of the informants stated that the majority of their stress was caused by parents' divorce, school, or even sexual abuse. Now they are in good condition and can continue their lives. When at school, they consult with the teacher

*"If now, yes, it could be stress. Stress because of the school exam." (Informant 1)*

*"When I was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade of elementary school, my parents divorced. At that time, my sibling was still 1 year old. Then my father remarried without telling us and never spoke to me again. My mother also remarried and had another child. Until now, I have been living with my grandmother (sad voice tone)" (Informant 4)*

### Determinants of Stress Experienced by Adolescents

This theme explains the various factors that cause stress experienced by adolescents. The determinants of adolescent stress in Surabaya include seven factors: parents' divorce, economic family background, comparison with others, debt, lack of communication with parents, academic factors, and individual personality factors. Adolescents who experience sexual abuse do not communicate with their parents because they are afraid to tell. On the other hand, parents are also not aware of any changes in adolescents who have experienced abuse. Academic factors include a heavy workload of assignments and school exams. Individual factors encompass introversion and overthinking, underage relationship issues, and environmental factors.

**Table 2.** Informant characteristics

No	Informant	Age (years)	Status	Education	Class	Gender	Stress Experience	Resident area of Surabaya
1	Informant 1	18 y.o	Student	High School	12	Female	Low	Center
2	Informant 2	16 y.o	Student	High School	10	Female	High	West
3	Informant 3	18 y.o	Student	High School	12	Female	Moderate	East
4	Informant 4	18 y.o	Student	High School	12	Female	Moderate	South
5	Informant 5	17 y.o	Student	High School	11	Female	High	Center
6	Informant 6	18 y.o	Student	High School	12	Male	Moderate	East
7	Informant 7	16 y.o	Student	High School	11	Female	High	Center
8	Informant 8	27 y.o	Teacher	Bachelor Degree	-	Male	-	North
9	Informant 9	29 y.o	Tutor	Bachelor Degree	-	Female	-	North
10	Informant 10	47 y.o	Head Program of Adolescents Mental Health	Master Degree	-	Female	-	South
11	Informant 11	35 y.o	Psychologist of Public Health Center	Bachelor Degree	-	Female	-	Center
12	Informant 12	30 y.o	Psychologist of Public Health Center	Bachelor Degree	-	Female	-	South

*"I want to finish my debt because we have a lot of debt to the neighbor" (Informant 1)*

*"Because my mother is busy, we hardly get to see each other. We rarely have deep conversations and lack communication within the family. Sometimes it's saddening, but there's not much I can do (cried with a sad voice tone)" (Informant 2)*

*"They keep comparing me with other people. Why am I like this, why can't I be like that (angry voice tone)" (Informant 6)*

*"Because of my parents' divorce, our economic situation has become very difficult. I live only with my mother, and my father doesn't always provide money. When he does, it's barely enough to fill my needs. Meanwhile, my mother works hard as a labourer." (Informant 3)*

**Table 3.** The analysis result of qualitative adolescents' mental disorder (stress) in Surabaya

Theme	Category	Code
Experience of Adolescents Mental Disorder	Stress in Elementary School	Parents divorce in Elementary Sexual Abuse from family Experienced violence since childhood
	Stress in Junior High School	Final exam for graduate Confuse choosing a school Move to Indonesia from abroad Parents divorce
	Stress in Senior High School	Final exam for graduate Confuse to choose career or university Relationship with love partner Doesn't have a good relationship with parents
Determinants of mental disorder (stress) experienced by adolescents	Family factors	Neglect from parents The family has economic problems Get compared to other people Communication not going well
	Individual factors	Overthinking and trauma Lack of adaptable skill
	Academic factors	A lot of assignments School exams Internship
	Relationship factors (love)	Conflict in relationship (break up) Risky relationship behavior (sex)
	Social environment factors	Have no friends Neighbor always give negative comments Bullying
Ability of coping stress mechanism	Positive activity adolescents	Me time Worship better than before Deciding the purpose and plan of life Study for exam Express emotions Motivating themselves Accepting the condition of life Talk with someone about what they have been through
	Negative activity adolescents	Self harm and Suicides (idea and action) Crying hysterically Run away from home Lock themselves in the room
Urgency help to handling mental disorder	Need help	Parents Friends Boyfriend/Girlfriend Consultation to School Counseling Guidance
	Doesn't need help	Keeping their own problems Never talk about what they have been through

### Ability of Coping Stress Mechanism

Coping mechanisms that adolescents use in Surabaya can lead to 2 things, which could be negative and positive. A positive response is an activity that adolescents engage in when experiencing stress that tends to be beneficial. A negative response is an activity that adolescents engage in when experiencing stress that tends to be self-defeating or destructive. The negative behavior such as crying hysterically, locking themselves in a room, screaming, and suicidal thoughts. Meanwhile, the positive activity leads to worship, encouraging themselves, me-time activity such as hanging out with friends or hanging out alone, talking to someone, and setting the goal and plan of life for the future.

*"At that time, I didn't want to get out of the room for 2 days. I didn't want to do anything, I didn't even want to eat" (Informant 1)*

*"I often cried in the middle of the night" (Informant 5)*

*"And at that time, I look for distractions. I express my anger through self-harming. I hurt myself by cutting my skin. I want to die. I even consider hitting my head against the wall." (Informant 7)*

*"I hang out outside of the home, sometimes even going to another city. I try to tell myself to worship more so my problems will stop." (Informant 3)*

*"I would rather continue my life as usual and focus on my life purpose. If I can solve the problem myself, I will solve it, but if I can't solve it, I will tell the teacher. But when I have ideals and goals in life, I think the problem doesn't exist." (Informant 6)*

*"Sometimes I ask if there's someone who has a problem, and usually they finally tell me what they have been going through. So I help to be a good listener for friends who have problems" (Informant 8)*

*"Usually talk about what happened when the kids look like they that a lot of problems" (Informant 9)*

### Help Urgency

Adolescents in Surabaya dealing with mental health problems (stress) need help to handle them. The help they need comes from parents, friends, and consulting with school counselling guidance. The most common form of help is sharing the problems they are going through to temporarily relieve the burden, and receiving physical touch like hugs and comforting gestures to help manage their emotions.

*"Well, my friends who have partners usually spend quality time together, which helps them not to feel stressed because they have someone to support them when*

*they are feeling low. As a social creature, that's what I need because it could influence my decisions. From my family, I usually gather opinions from my siblings, parents, and friends, and then I decide what's best for me. My father usually gives me money, hehe.....but my mother usually just offers her opinion. However, I don't always discuss everything with my parents. When it comes to the School Counseling Guidance, I was afraid in the beginning, but it turned out well. The counseling rooms at school are also private, so it's comfortable to talk there." (Informant 3)*

### The Experience of Adolescents Mental

Disorder in Surabaya shows that most experience moderate to severe levels of stress. Most first experience stress during elementary school and up until high school. Stress in adolescents is caused by many factors, both internal and external to the individual. This is in accordance with the stress response is a natural physiological reaction of the individual, elicited to maintain the internal environment and evoke adaptive behaviors, ultimately leading to survival.(15) Other references state that Adolescence is one of the phases that are risky for becoming unstable due to hormonal, physical, and social changes that differ from previous phases. More than two-thirds of adolescents experience stress at varying levels: 22.8% with low stress, 43.0% with moderate stress, and 16.8% with high to very high stress.(16)

Determinants of mental disorder (stress) experienced by adolescents show that all teenagers experience stress conditions with various sources of stressors. Seven factors cause stress in adolescents, including the first factor, parental divorce. It relates to previous research that incomplete family or parental divorce is a cause of stress.(17) Other studies state that parental divorce causes adolescents to feel unhappy and lose one of their parents' affections, and makes them stressed.(18) The second factor causing stress in adolescents in Surabaya is the family's economic condition. The previous research states that the economic status of the family influences adolescent stress; families who have economic problems can contribute to causing stress in adolescents in the family.(19) The results show that other factors are comparison with others, debt, lack of communication, individual factors, and academic factors. It relates to previous research that a lack of harmony in the relationship between parents and teenagers, a lack of quality communication, can cause stress to adolescents.(19) Therefore, it's common for adolescents to experience stress. Experiencing stress is part and parcel of adolescence. School is a major source of stress for many teenagers, as they tend to worry about their academic performance and their interaction with

peers and teachers.(21) Most teenagers generally feel stress in everyday life. Based on previous research, it is stated that there is a correlation between stress triggers in daily activities—such as friends, school performance, and home life—and symptoms of social anxiety and depression.(25) Determinant factors due to family conflict and academic pressure are the main triggers for increased stress.(26) On the other hand, the personality factor could be the reason for stress.(27) The increasing social stress burden throughout adolescence, combined with pre-adolescent vulnerabilities such as genetic factors and phenotypic traits (for example, temperament and personality), potentially increases the risk of social anxiety in adolescents, particularly fear of social situations or interactions. The increasing social stress burden throughout adolescence combined with pre-adolescent vulnerabilities such as genetic factors and phenotypic traits (for example, temperament and personality), potentially increases the risk of social anxiety in adolescents, particularly fear of social situations or interactions.(25) There is a strong correlation between stress in adolescents and serious psychological problems. Stress can be caused by five main factors: stress due to parents, stress from the family environment, stress from academics, stress due to teachers, and stress from friends.(17)

The results show that the ability to cope with stress mechanisms in adolescents can be negative or positive. On the other hand, other studies show that there is a correlation between coping mechanisms and adolescent stress levels; the better the coping mechanism, the lower the adolescent's stress level ( $p = 0.000$ ; correlation coefficient  $p = -0.37$ ). Around 1.7% of adolescent stress is explained by coping mechanisms.(30) There is a significant correlation between age, gender, coping stress strategy, and stress level.(31) In the experimental group, 83.4% exhibited high positive coping, while 16.6% exhibited low positive coping. Low positive coping is associated with higher levels of perceived stress, anxiety symptoms, and loneliness. There is a correlation indicating that the low positive coping group experienced higher stress levels compared to the high positive coping group.(32). The factors affecting adolescents' ability to cope with stress include differences between individuals due to their genetic background, epigenetic regulation, gender, and early-life experiences.(15) The ways of coping with stress as four composite scores reflecting engagement coping (active coping, self-reliance) or disengagement coping (withdrawal coping, helplessness).(33) Adolescents report that they have strong coping strategies, including stress relief through rationalization and acceptance of the situation, distraction activities,

spirituality, and self-comfort methods. However, they feel the need for further support from their families and society in general. In particular, they expressed the need for space to express their concerns and obtain guidance through healthy discussions with adults.(26)

Urgency helps in handling mental disorders. The research shows that adolescents show a different strategy for handling symptoms of stress. They identify social repercussions and resource availability as primary factors influencing their coping strategies. Adolescents often believe their worries will be judged, so they only confide in trusted individuals. These trusted confidants do not share their concerns with others to maintain trust. Besides that, adolescents that going through stress need the help of a professional.(34) The effort to handle adolescent mental health needs to be done with cross-sector collaboration so the treatment is more comprehensive. This collaboration can include sectors from both government and non-government organizations.(35) In implementing the program and evolving, adolescents' involvement is needed so that the program can run optimally.(36)

## CONCLUSION

This research provides insight into the phenomenon of mental health problems, specifically stress among adolescents. For adolescents, this can trigger more severe mental health problems or mental illness. This is evidenced by ineffective coping mechanisms that can lead to suicidal thoughts or attempts. The advantage of this study is that it identifies the stress status experienced by adolescents at low, medium, and high levels. Thus, the determinants that cause stress can be identified according to the level. The weakness of this study is that it does not identify non-government programs, and it does not explore external factors that greatly influence stress experienced by adolescents, such as environmental factors, patterns of relationships with friends, and others. Therefore, further researchers can conduct more in-depth research on the external aspects of individuals.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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