

An Overview of Avoidant Personality Disorder

Meixi Guo^{1, a, *, †}, Yilin Guo^{2, b, *, †}, Yuning Li^{3, c, *, †}

¹Guangzhou International Foreign Language School, Guangzhou, China

²High School affiliated to Renmin University, Beijing, Hebei, China

³High School affiliated to Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xi'an, Shanxi, China

*Corresponding author: ^amelinaguo@edu.cn, ^b2724410335@qq.com, ^c1349874607@qq.com

†These authors contributed equally.

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Abstract: An avoidant personality disorder is a psychological disorder that causes significant problems in an individual's ability to participate in social conditions. Furthermore, its typical symptom is afraid of communicating with others because of feeling themselves inferior. This research article is an overview of avoidant personality disorder, addressing crucial information about this mental situation while stating impacts and future recommendations regarding this illness. Most of the information presented is based on reviews of pertinent literature, which will be incorporated into the themes and details of this research article. Regarding the research results, major findings include the possible etiology of avoidant personality disorder from biological and psychological perspectives, the impact of this disorder on society and on diagnosed individuals, lastly, some widely-respected treatment methods. In conclusion, this research article aims to inform readers with a general summary of the avoidant personality disorder and to provide insightful information related to the future of this mental illness.

1. Introduction

Avoidant personality disorder (APD) is a mental illness associated with an enduring pattern of hypersensitivity and the feeling of being negatively judged by other members of society. "People with APD generally desire social connection but are often crippled by a sense of personal inadequacy and intense fears of social rejection" [1]. Additionally, most individuals diagnosed with avoidant personality disorder have low self-esteem, which is likely due to the inestimable impact of the negative judgement on their mental situation.

A great number of research reports and reviews about avoidant personality disorder are available to the public. At the same time, most of the studies served to inform readers about the general facts of this mental disorder. The ultimate goal of this review paper is to incorporate information discovered by previous research scientists and suggest crucial implications and provide reasonable suggestions regarding the future studies of this disorder.

2. LECTURE REVIEW

2.1. Current Background of APD

2.1.1. Development

Previous researches about avoidant personality disorder abounded with the belief that the development of this mental illness can be traced back to the early 1900s. Although the avoidant personality disorder was not named for some time, a great number of people gradually became aware of its existence and the destructive impacts it brought to the patients. The official acknowledgement

of avoidant personality disorder started when Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler described patients who exhibited signs of avoidant personality disorder in his 1911 work [1].

2.1.2. Prevalence

Based on the DSM-5, Avoidant personality disorder affects about 2.4 percent of the overall population in the United States [2]. Even though the percentage is rather unthreatening, it is still extremely important to implement effective measures to control the prevalence of avoidant personality disorder. This mental condition typically develops during early adulthood while appearing in individuals of all genders, although it can be said that women are more vulnerable to avoidant personality disorder. Additionally, individuals associated with anxiety-related illnesses usually have a higher chance of simultaneously suffering from avoidant personality disorder [3].

2.1.3. Symptoms

Generally speaking, typical symptoms of avoidant personality disorder include the tendency to avoid activities involved in an extraordinary amount of interpersonal interactions (likely due to fear of disapproval), the unwillingness to connect through relationships unless they are sure of acceptance, and a self-image of being socially inferior and incapable of achievements. Apart from the overt symptoms of avoidant personality disorder, patients are often extremely reluctant to take risks or participate in any potentially embarrassing activities [4]. Furthermore, most people associated with this mental illness tend to exaggerate issues due to their morbid awkwardness, which might lead to emotional fluctuations and periods of extreme mental discomfort. Patients with avoidant personality disorder are often extremely self-conscious and overly sensitive in social situations since they tend to evade judgements and criticisms in the outside world. Expectedly, patients with avoidant personality disorder often avoid dangers, revealing their tendency to be extremely self-protective. Despite all the detailed symptoms of avoidant personality disorder, the major indicator should be social inhibition and the clear unwillingness to be exposed in public situations.

Even though researchers reached a consensus on many fundamental aspects of avoidant personality disorder, a great number of ideas still remained in debate throughout the years. One of the major controversies regarding avoidant personality disorder is whether living conditions can be a risk factor for this disorder and whether life satisfaction will affect the likelihood of being diagnosed. Research done by Ingrid Olsson and Alv A Dahl in 2011 provided a possible explanation with data presenting that the patients of avoidant personality disorder more frequently reported a lower level of education and lower-income than normal individuals in the control group. For this reason, it is to be recommended that in the future, society should provide sufficient support for those who are suffering from inadequate living situations, attempting to decrease the rate of diagnosis for avoidant personality disorder.

2.2. Etiology

As a fact, effective solutions and treatments for a mental disorder can only be created if a coherent understanding of the underlying causes of this disorder is guaranteed. Regarding the etiology of avoidant personality disorder, this concept is often considered unclear and ambiguous since various explanations are directed to discover and understand the exact cause. Despite the ambiguity, many researchers concluded that both genetic (nature) and environmental (nurture) factors, such as rejection by other members of society, play a role in the etiology of avoidant personality disorder.

2.2.1. Brain Abnormalities

Firstly, brain abnormalities are considered to be one of the prominent causes of avoidant personality disorder, and these biological symptoms may appear in the affected individual as early as two years old [1]. Brain abnormalities can, in other words, be defined as the malfunction of certain structures of the brain, and people that undergo intense bursts of anxiety in structures of the brain involved in emotional control and stress response can be described as having a neurological deficiency [2]. Patients might be diagnosed with avoidant personality disorder, in this case, if they are significantly associated with neurological deficiency. Neurological studies of brain anatomy provide corroborating evidence that factors of brain abnormalities may contribute to the development

of personality disorders such as avoidant personality disorder [3]. In short, the cause of an individual's diagnosis of avoidant personality disorder could be brain abnormalities such as abnormal, intense bursts of anxiety in the brain.

2.2.2. Genetic Components

Secondly, the etiology of avoidant personality disorder might have a genetic component, and a family history of mental illness is a significant risk factor at all times [4]. As an example, if a member of the family associated with avoidant personality disorder gave birth to a child, the new birth is not guaranteed to be diagnosed with this mental illness. Still, his or her risk will be increased due to the family history. The genetic transmission of behavioral tendencies could explain the reason why children tend to have the same behavioral and thought patterns as their parents diagnosed with an avoidant personality disorder. In fact, genetic factors account for one-third of the total risk for this disorder, claiming it to be one of the most powerful underlying causes considering all.

2.2.3. Environmental Factors

Obviously, genetics alone can never fully explain the etiology of any mental disorder since past experiences and childhood traumas are the major influencers of an individual's mental situation throughout his or her life. The major cause of avoidant personality disorder should be environmental factors, especially childhood failures and a range of factors from negative social experiences, past difficulties associated with interpersonal interactions, parental or peer disapproval to unbearable humiliation [5]. Considering all the different environmental factors that could contribute to the development of avoidant personality disorder, childhood experiences should be the most important factor since an individual's beliefs, values, and behavioral tendencies are mostly determined during the childhood phase.

The type of parental interaction is the paramount factor in early childhood that will shape personality and cause avoidant personality disorder. The relationship a child has with his or her guardian can be a protective shield if positive. Still, on the other hand, parental interaction can be the direct cause for personality disorders if negative. For example, parents who reject their children's capabilities are generally strict and demanding, leading to the child's low self-esteem, a major symptom of avoidant personality disorder. Aside from childhood traumas, peer rejection in school environments can also create an identical level of destruction to an individual's confidence. Hence, to avoid various kinds of negative feedback from society, some people will eventually become socially inhibited.

Certain patterns could be observed in the childhood antecedents of individuals diagnosed with an avoidant personality disorder. Observing the level of athletic performance of different children, adolescents that grew up with personality disorders show less involvement and interest in sportive activities. Additionally, this group of adolescents generally have fewer hobbies than average children of their age, which is reasonable due to their fear of embarrassment, failure, and rejection. As a result, less adolescent popularity in schools is also observed due to the lack of interests and activities [6].

An avoidant personality disorder may be more common in individuals who experienced physical separation from their guardians during the childhood phase. In this case, adolescents who lack parental comfort and protection will be more introverted and more sensitive to failure and rejection than adolescents who grew up under their parents' protective shade. Furthermore, a range of experiences from subjugation and abandonment to emotional inhibition during childhood could lead to avoidant personality disorder.

In conclusion, even though the etiology of avoidant personality disorder is complicated, the major causes include brain abnormalities, innate genetic influences, parental interaction in childhood, and experiences of rejection and humiliation from members of society. It is essential to support children experiencing a rather traumatic childhood to protect them from an avoidant personality disorder and other destructive psychological illnesses.

2.3. Individual and Social Impact

A great amount of negative, absurd beliefs and behaviors can result from the various causes of avoidant personality disorder explained above. It can be inferred that patients with Avoidant personality

disorder will not only be emotionally and physically affected by their symptoms but will also negatively influence the relationships and social environments around them.

2.3.1. Individual Impacts

First of all, a behavioral impact of avoidant personality disorder is that the fear of rejection may cause maladaptive suppression of emotions, as individuals might choose to control their sadness, uncomforted, and anger when interacting with others [1]. Even though suppressing emotions is necessary under certain conditions, people associated with an avoidant personality disorder will experience the desire to let out their emotions. Due to the need to express their overwhelmed feelings and the inability to express their feelings to other people, patients might act out their suppressed feelings on themselves through methods of self-harm. Additionally, low self-esteem might lead to suicide if the level of hatred towards oneself is extremely severe.

2.3.2. Social Impacts

Secondly, a social impact of avoidant personality disorder is that since patients usually experience the lack of intimate relationships due to distrust and social inhibition, few members of the society who are connected to these patients will feel mistreated in their relationships. For example, individuals associated with an avoidant personality disorder may refuse to open up to a partner, which might cause some partners to even feel rejected themselves [2]. Hence, patients will push their family members, friends, and partners away from them due to their unwillingness to trust and share emotions. Moreover, it is also unbearable for patients to establish relationships, and some of their behaviors will be thought discourteousness. However, it is just the way people who have avoidant personality disorder prevent themselves from potential damages and think their communications or behaviors well-distracting others. Take some of their daily behaviors as examples, and they are afraid of having eye contact and communicating with others [7]. As I mentioned previously, people who have avoidant personality disorder always avoid doing things, making it hard for them to bond a close relationship with others besides their relatives.

To sum up, an avoidant personality disorder can deteriorate an individual's mental condition by lowering one's self-esteem and restricting his or her ability to express emotions to the outside world.

2.4. Treatment

2.4.1. Psychotherapy

Proper treatment methods are vital to patients with avoidant personality disorder, just like the proper use of anti-biotics is essential to people affected by bacterial infections. Fortunately, an avoidant personality disorder is rather amenable to treatment. Patients can adjust their emotional tendencies through various treatment methods, mostly not associated with medical treatment. One of the most effective psychological treatment methods of avoidant personality disorder is named psychotherapy. "Psychotherapy is a general term for treating mental health problems by talking with a psychiatrist, psychologist or other mental health providers [1]." However, an avoidant personality disorder may also be challenging to treat through psychotherapy since it is an enduring pattern of behavior, and people may not recognize that psychotherapeutic help is required at a specific moment during their lifetime, or they might reject therapy help from the outside world [7].

Based on the definition mentioned above, psychotherapy is the major treatment method for avoidant personality disorder. This kind of talk therapy most of the time focuses on overcoming fears and changing thought patterns and behaviors while supporting the patient in coping with social situations. Since patients are suffering from abnormal thoughts, talk therapy should be implemented to guide patients towards the correct way of dealing with interpersonal interactions. Additionally, therapists using psychotherapy should compliment patients with an avoidant personality disorder to compensate for their lack of positive feedback. This treatment method of talk therapy should be effective since the major problem to defeat in patients of avoidant personality disorder is their abnormal thought patterns.

2.4.2. Schema Therapy

Besides psychotherapy, schema therapy is a subcategory of talk therapy that is widely implemented to treat patients with an avoidant personality disorder. "A key feature of schema therapy is "limited reparenting," in which the client expresses childhood needs and learns to develop and internalize a

healthy parent voice [2]." In other words, schema therapy is based on the assumption that patients extremely require the missing gaps of their childhood to be filled to proceed with other thought guidelines. By acting as a parent figure, the therapist effectively provides the patients with what they needed and lacked during childhood [8].

2.4.3. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Lastly, cognitive behavioral therapy is another treatment method that can deal with an avoidant personality disorder. Cognitive-behavioral therapy focuses mainly on deleting and changing cognitive distortions and behaviors from patients, improving an individual's emotional regulation ability, and helping develop coping strategies that target solving current life problems. Through controlling emotions of self-rejection and the tendency to be socially inhibited, therapists could eventually change the way patients interact with other members of society and the way patients participate in public situations [3].

3. Limitations and Future Implications

3.1. Limitations to Treatment

Albeit there are several treatments such as psychotherapy, schema therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and so on, it is just based on therapists communicating with patients. In other words, there is no exact medicine or specialized treatment for this disease. Some medicine like Diazepam, Etizolam, and Sertraline indeed relieve anxiety and depression. Patients could just use these kinds of medicines [1].

Furthermore, people with avoidant personality disorder could go to counseling and have some treatments depending on their own situations; therapists could also be conducive to help them. What's more, there is no systemic and effective treatment for patients, which is supposed to be solved in the future [9].

3.2. Future Implications

Apart from having a comprehensive understanding of the different features of avoidant personality disorder, it is also essential to predict the future implications and trends to effectively subdue the destructive impacts of this disorder on society. The future predictions of avoidant personality disorder can be considered from the individual and societal levels.

From the individual level, the scientific community should acknowledge the importance of treatment methods since it is extremely vital to diagnose and effectively cure patients currently suffering from the disorder. Making a reasonable prediction, individuals diagnosed at the current period of time and in the future will most likely have a positive chance to be cured due to rapidly developing treatment methods that are more trustworthy and effective. However, this prediction will only be valid if treatment methods are revised and studied in more detail in the future.

From the societal level, the number of people diagnosed with an avoidant personality disorder will most likely continue to show an increasing trend. Nowadays, people face stress during their everyday lives due to the rapid modern lifestyle and the pressure to sustain themselves and their families. As a result, individuals might develop an introverted personality and risk avoidant personality disorder.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, an avoidant personality disorder is a mental illness in which patients are characterized by extremely low self-esteem and fear of rejection [10]. Leading to social inhibition and abnormal social interaction, an avoidant personality disorder may cause a great amount of dysfunction in an individual's ability to handle dynamic events in their lifetime. Even though it is commonly understood that genetic factors, brain abnormalities, childhood experiences, and environmental factors may contribute to causing avoidant personality disorder, more research in the future will be required to determine trustworthy statements regarding the most influential risk factor.

Researchers have revealed the impacts of avoidant personality disorder on an individual's everyday living, such as being unwilling to participate in job environments due to the extreme fear of

rejection. Extreme situations include self-harm and even suicide because of criticisms disapproval, and the unbearable anxiety brought by living in a social environment. Apart from personal impacts, patients will likely create an uncomfortable atmosphere for his or her family members and partners. Effective treatment based on individual conditions is extremely vital to abate the negative personal and social impacts of avoidant personality disorder. Several treatment methods are possible, including psychotherapy and schema therapy, while each method has a certain level of scientific proof.

To achieve a deeper understanding of avoidant personality disorder, future researchers should perform experiments and observational studies that are free from bias. In other words, researchers should create an experimental condition that can guarantee results to be generalized for different genders and age groups. Samples should consider not only people of one sex, not only people from a certain age group, and not only people from a certain background or culture. In summary, the development of future studies for an avoidant personality disorder is based on valid research methods, effective treatment methods, and powerful explanations that can be eventually formed.

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