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DEPRESSION IN SOUTH KOREA

Yachtx Presents



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INTRODUCTION



Overview

Our objective is to explore the causes of depression through three different age groups: adolescent, middle-aged, and elderly by using a systems-thinking approach. The team consists of five members that have direct relatives or friends that have been affected by depression which has directly affected their lives. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the cause of depression in order to find the cause.

WHAT'S DEPRESSION?

Mood Disorder
Mental Illness
Depressive Disorder
Negative Feelings

**"Depression is
not a decision.
It is a
diagnosis."**

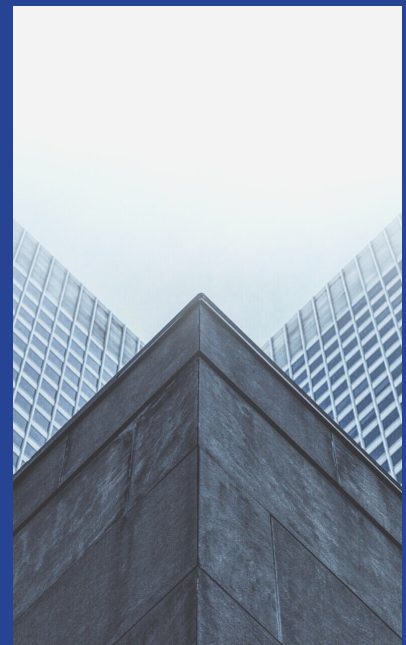
MOTIVATION

Our team has lost three of our classmates to suicide in the span of only five days in November 2020. This news made the headlines of every news outlet in Taiwan and initiated talks about mental illness around school and around the country. Not long after in January 2021, a beloved Korean celebrity, Iron, and actress, Song Yoo-Jung, both committed suicide. This convinced us that more constructive discussions about mental health need to take place, especially in Asia. Therefore, we have decided to focus our research on the causes of depression in South Korea, currently one of the most affected countries in Asia.



Research Methods

The team will conduct both qualitative and quantitative research. Data and statistics will be gathered from reliable sources, such as official government publications and trustworthy international organizations. Additionally, our own primary research will be conducted through ways such as arranging interview with professor from the Psychology department to further broaden the scope of our research. Other sources include case studies, news articles, and journals on the topic of depression.



CHALLENGE LANDSCAPE

Social Cost of Suicide



In 2018, Korea was reported to have the fourth-highest suicide rate with 26.6 cases per 100,000 population and South Korean women having the highest suicide rate in the world (So, 2020), according to WHO. It is also believed that 50% of suicides in the world are related to depression (Koo, 2018). “The average cost for one visit for a patient with depression in Korea was 127,300 KRW” (113.28 USD); in addition, “the costs associated with depression were also lower when visiting a psychiatrist, which suggests that active treatment interventions by psychiatrists in the early stages of depression and establishing more effective policies, such as an early-refer program to psychiatrists, may reduce the direct medical care costs for depression” (Shin et al, 2020).



Economic Theories



Some empirical research shows that the social cost for every patient is significantly high. From the research of Sung Man Chang(2011), the total cost of depression in South Korea was estimated to be \$4,049 million, of which \$2,958.9 million, the largest proportion, represents a morbidity cost. In addition, the mortality cost was \$921.6 million.

According to the research by WHO, the effects of the present economic crisis on mental health present an opportunity to strengthen policies that would not only mitigate the impact of “the recession on deaths and injuries arising from suicidal acts and alcohol use disorders but also reduce the health and economic burden presented by impaired mental health” as well as alcohol use disorders in any economic cycle. As a result, “there are powerful public health arguments for social protection, active labor market programs, family support, debt relief, and effective alcohol policy” (World Health Organization, 2007).



CHALLENGE LANDSCAPE

From a Psychological Perspective



After contacting the professor in the department of Psychology in our school, he used a reservoir as a metaphor for depression. Everyone's emotions are like reservoirs, while some reservoirs are big, others are small, illustrating the differences between the size of our brain structure and serotonin secretion. All the negative emotions are like pouring water into a reservoir: if there are no good evacuation pipes, the reservoir will slowly rise to full; if your reservoir can no longer hold any more water, you will suffer from depression. Relatively speaking, even if the reservoir is small, you won't suffer from depression if you can expel the water properly.

The analogy of this reservoir not only allows us to understand that the cause of depression is composed of innate brain structure, emotional experience, and the degree of mutual help from the community but also lets us know how to evaluate our physical and mental conditions as well as understand that depression is an emotional sickness, not a terrifying monster.



CAUSES OF WIDESPREAD DEPRESSION IN SOUTH KOREA



ADOLESCENT

According to recent surveys, the depression rate among adolescents is rising at a rapid pace. We will discuss reasons for this phenomenon from three different aspects: social media, education, and family issues, respectively.

Social Media

Recently, software such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter has been used frequently. While people are enjoying the pleasure of posting stories of their daily lives and sharing monumental events with their friends, they are actually being “jailed” by the app. Users now pay great attention to follower counts, number of likes, friends, and comments, as if that defines their social status in the real life. Therefore, once that number drops, people begin to doubt themselves, leading them to feel insecure about their appearance, chasing an unattainable image that has been photoshopped to fit the standard of “beauty”. As a result, they will start to invest themselves in the beauty that eventually leads to a hyper fixation on appearance and cosmetic plastic surgery (Chou, 2020). However, if the results turn out badly, they will feel ashamed of their appearance and start to internalize their lack of confidence, and fall into the track of depression (You et al, 2016).

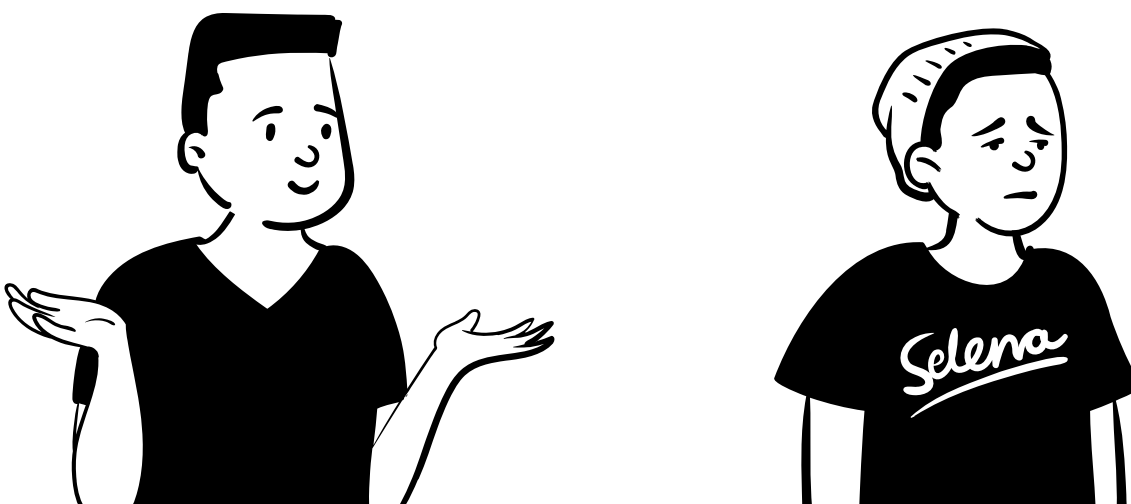
ADOLESCENT

Education

The Korean education system is known to be highly competitive, and their students usually spend all their time studying in cram schools. In fact, in 2010, the country spent “7.6% of its GDP on all levels of education – significantly more than the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 6.3%” (2013). Students face immense pressure preparing for the university entrance exam, suneung, and to score well on it has been the aim of their education for the past 12 years (Sharif, 2018). The academic pressure imposed on students is so extreme that many experience depression (Lee, Reed, 1991).

Family Issue

Confucianism is heavily embedded within the Korean society, where concepts such as, “the men lead outside, and the women lead inside”, have led their way of thinking for decades (Sorenson); this belief causes the father to feel that as the men of the household, he is obliged to work until midnight in order to provide a better living environment for the family. Consequently, children lose valuable family time with the father figure in the family. Since family is one of the most important support systems for ones who have depression, without family, adolescents may turn to alcohol or drugs to battle depression (Children’s Bureau, 2018).





MIDDLE AGE

Many young adults in South Korea suffer from depression as a result of the rapid economic growth since the 1970s. It was found that various variables affect young adults' depressive mood: gender, monthly household income, economic activities, housing type, marital status, the stress in the workplace, drinking level, meeting neighbors, and friendship activities (Yim, Kwon, 2021).

Gender Roles

Gender roles assigned by traditional values and gender inequality, especially females in the society and the workplace, is the main cause of depressive symptoms. Perceived gender discrimination is associated with lower self-esteem, which further resulted in depression (Kim, Park, 2018).



MIDDLE AGE

Financial Pressure

The distribution of salary and wage expenses in South Korea is unbalanced. The unbalanced system has caused blue-collar, sales and service workers to have higher depression rates than white-collar workers. Additionally, blue-collar, sales, and service workers have a higher economic burden than white-collar workers because of their lower income which in turn contributes to depression. Aside from the factors discussed above, the higher depression scores found in blue-collar, sales, and service workers, these occupational groups may also be at a relatively disadvantaged position when coping with depression (Kim et al, 2016). Also, many young adults in South Korea live in inadequate housing conditions. Research shows that depressive symptoms are highly relevant for young adults' neighborhood environment satisfaction, especially natural environment satisfaction and safety level environment satisfaction, with a prevalence rate of 32.5% and 30%, respectively (Yim, Kwon, 2021). It implies that low income results in dissatisfaction with the neighborhood environment and causes depressive symptoms among young adults.

Workplace Pressure

South Korea is one of the countries with the longest working hours in the OECD countries. Long working hours are a serious risk factor for depressive symptoms in employees. When workers suffer from long working hours, a lack of social support, and receive inadequate rewards the amount of job stress increases, leading to depression. When there is an inadequate reward for hours worked, it further leads to a lack of recovery time, which then again to depressive symptoms (Yoon et al, 2018).





ELDERLY

Lack of Social Interaction

As suggested from the latest research, loneliness was associated with higher rates of depression (Sciences, 2020). Physiological diseases that are found in the elderly worsen their mobility, and cause them to participate less in social activity and feel isolated. “Poor social relationships (characterized by social isolation or loneliness) were associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.” As a result, depression is intensified due to solitude.

Financial Difficulty

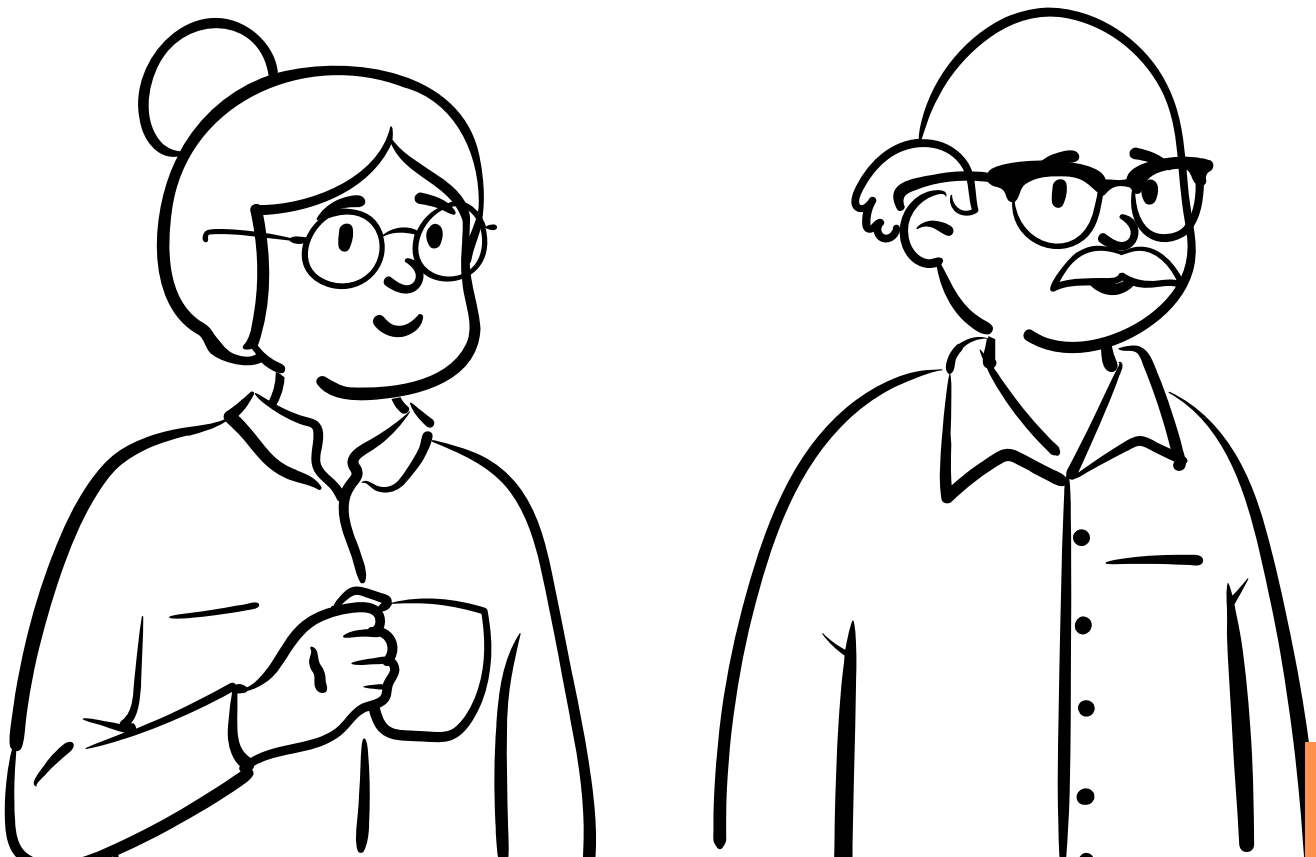
Bereavement and empty nest syndrome are the other causes of depression in Korean elderly groups. The elderly are particularly vulnerable to the emotional impacts after the death of their partners and friends as well as their offspring moving away. Heejung Kim suggests that the melancholic tendency of those living alone was higher than those living with others. “Through secondary data analysis, it showed that the variance of depressive symptoms was 18.1% for those living alone compared to 23.7% for those living with others” (2018).

ELDERLY

Physiological Diseases

Moreover, another factor of severe depression is the economic pressure on the elderly. “Pensions at a Glance 2015” released by The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development showed that 49.5% of Korean seniors are below the poverty line. It is a huge burden for the Korean elderly to survive both in the cities and rural areas, especially as most of them experienced the oil shocks in the 1980s’ and the Asian Financial Crisis in the 1990s’. Sujin Kim(2019) pointed out that absolute income volatility has detrimental psychological consequences for older adults who live on their own.

"49.5% of Korean seniors are below the poverty line."



EDUCATION



Education is important in raising public awareness about depression in order to reduce the rate of depression that is rising tremendously each year. Education is the easiest way to implement knowledge about the symptoms and the effect of depression on the public. Therefore depression will not be seen as a normal bad feeling that most people think of but as a life-threatening mental illness that should be highly aware of. By doing so, depression can be prevented.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS



South Korea has included suicide prevention as a national task for the first time in history. “The government has carried out the “Bridge of Life” project for the Mapo Bridge which is one of the most notorious locations for people who attempt suicide” (Strother, 2012). This project is aimed to pacify people who visit the bridge to end their lives by projecting inspirational texts and photos.

The government should also set up a Korea Suicide Prevention Center which will provide immediate services to the needy such as medical and psychological counseling for suicide survivors or the people who have a tendency to commit suicide. Moreover, a 24-hour consultation hotline should be set up in order to provide help and care to the people immediately (Therapy Route, 2020).

Government can increase the budget for research on depression through ways such as crowdfunding or a shift in the government budget. The research will help us to know more about the factor of depression based on the data that is collected and eventually find the associations of the factors between suicide and depression. Furthermore, more precise data and information can be gathered through research carried out according to gender, economic status, and education level. Moreover, more advanced tools can be invented to detect and help depression patients after the research is being carried out. As a result, we can find out the core problem of the patient more easily and in a rapid way.

Reduce insurance wages for the people is also another solution. Low insurance wages will help families with low economic standards to reduce their burden and provide protection to the people as the main factor of many depression patients is financial pressure.



GAPS & LEVER OF CHANGE

GAPS

- **People tend to ignore the people around them who suffer from depression and need help.**

LEVER OF CHANGE

- The government and private sector should raise public awareness about depression by organizing campaigns. For example, we can promote National Suicide Prevention Day to emphasize healing, help and giving hopes to the public (The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline).
- Government, public and private sector should promote World Mental Day by organizing some events like raising funds and setting up campaigns from time to time. Besides, social media can convert all the profanity typed on that day into stickers or inspirational quotes to get the public more aware about depression (Strother, 2012). Through this action, people will be exposed to this topic in a more interesting way and will pay more attention to it (Tizzard, 2020).

EDUCATION

Process of Study
Field of research



ECONOMICS

Social Science
Behaviour & Interactions



GAPS

- Most families are facing economic problems in Korean because of the high standard of living that eventually brings pressure to the society. Thus, depression rate increases (Singh, 2017)

LEVER OF CHANGE

- Government can improve pensions to the elderly and some social bonus to the poor families to help them improve their standard of living (Park et al, 2012).

GAPS

- Abuse of using social media by violating the freedom of speech. For example, teenagers often use swear words when chatting with friends on social media which hurt others unconsciously (Jung, 2018).

LEVER OF CHANGE

- The government can implement laws to restrict the public from using swear words online. Government should consider profanity as punishable so that the public will be aware of the importance of the speaking of profanity (Reilly, 2012).

SOCIAL

Organization
Companionship of
Communities



INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED



The team has chosen to omit information about COVID-19 as the pandemic is still progressing as we are conducting our research. With such a volatile world climate and since the pandemic is still very recent, the team felt that not enough research has been published for us to compile an all encompassing piece of research.

A challenge that we faced was deciding whether we should focus our research on depression or suicide. First, we were debating whether depression was an ‘illness’ that needs to be ‘cured’ or was it an emotional phase. Then after we have settled that depression do effect people’s daily life in a negative way, we were then debating whether suicide should be a choice or should the public try their best to prevent it. After much discussion, the team decided that although not all suicides are caused by depression, it is the cause for the people we know. As a result, depression was finally chosen as our topic.