Youth Social Withdrawal (Hikikomori) in Hong Kong

Hikikomori, a phenomenon that is characterised by severe social withdrawal originated from Japan. Individuals with Hikikomori meet several criteria: (1) spending most of the day and nearly every day confined to home, (2) persistently avoiding social situations and social relationships, (3) experiencing interference with academic, work, family and social functioning as a result of withdrawal, and (4) feeling irritable, ashamed or worried about the situation while it is going on (Teo & Gaw, 2010). This phenomenon is typically exhibited by adolescents and young adults.

In Hong Kong, Hikikomori is becoming a growing concern as the problem is getting more and more popular. Funded by Excel3, Prof Paul Yip, Dr. Michael Chau, and Prof. Cecilia Cheng along with the research team from the CSRP conducted a cross-sectional telephone-based survey to explore the phenomenon of Hikikomori in Hong Kong. In this study, social withdrawal is defined as individuals who meet the first two diagnostic criteria adopted from Teo and Gaw (2010), while have not been diagnosed with any other disorders and have reported a duration of 6 months with social withdrawal behaviours.

Prevalence Comparable to Japan

In Japan, the lifetime prevalence of Hikikomori among young people in their twenties is around 2% (Koyama, 2010). It is estimated there are around 16,900-41,000 young people in Hong Kong who may exhibit Hikikomori, indicating that the prevalence is around 1.9% to as high as 4.7%. The prevalence of Hikikomori in Hong Kong is at an alarming level, which is comparable to Japan or even more severe than Japan, the country of origin.

Gender Difference in Becoming Social Withdrawn

Men have a higher chance than women to exhibit Hikikomori. Among the 19 participants (1.9% of 1010) classified as exhibiting Hikikomori, 11 of them are men. Moreover, we should not neglect individuals with lower levels of social withdrawal (shorter duration). Among the 25 participants (2.5% of 1010) with a shorter duration of social withdrawal, 15 of them are men. Prof. Yip and colleagues from the research team believe that young Asian men are more sensitive to failure as they are ambitious and have a strong desire to succeed. Thus, they are easier to withdraw from the society.

Factors Associated with Hikikomori

There are several factors associated with high levels of social withdrawal, including educational level, negative life events, one’s willingness to express themselves, unemployment, and one’s mental health.

1. Educational Level

It was found that low educational level (form 3 or below) may increase the risk of getting high levels of social withdrawal by 2.3 times, comparing to individuals with higher educational level. The research team believed that the less educated group may have worse coping flexibility and tended to perform more high risk behaviours.

2. Negative Life Events

Negative life events, such as job stress may be one of the causes of social withdrawal. Job stress may increase the chance of an individual to becoming socially withdrawn by 1.5 times.

3. Willingness to Expressing Distress

Individuals with severe social withdrawal are found to be 0.6 times and estimated to be 0.8 times less willing to expressing their distress face-to-face and
through phone respectively. However, they are 1.6 times more likely to expressing themselves on forums and blogs.

4. Employment Status
A person’s employment status may be a key factor to a person’s higher levels of social withdrawal as well. Comparing to an employed person, an unemployed person is 6.4 times riskier to becoming social withdrawn. A student is estimated to be 1.7 times as risky as an employed person to becoming socially withdrawn.

5. Psychological Factor
The 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) measures a person’s mental health. A high GHQ-12 total score indicates mental unhealthiness. Individuals obtaining a higher score in GHQ-12 have a 1.1 times higher risk of becoming social withdrawal while individuals who are experiencing significant interference with academic, work, family, and social functioning is 3.8 times riskier in being at a higher level of social withdrawal.

References