







Activating Strategies to Fight Hikikomori Condition 2023-1-IT02-KA210-ADU-000150723

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PUHU-Module 1

Beyond the Shadows

Avoidance and Procrastination in Adolescence

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Introduction

The OUTSIDE Project

The "Outside" project is an initiative centered around the concept of "Hikikomori" (Social Isolation). The young adults suffering from Hikikomori syndrome often confine themselves to their homes, beyond meeting basic needs, and become estranged from their families and communities. This condition renders it impossible for individuals to engage in work or school activities and is commonly observed among young adults aged 18–35.

In recent years, tracking the mental states and isolation of young adults after leaving school has become increasingly challenging, prompting a search for solutions in the field of Adult Education (EDA). The "Outside" project aims to reach this complex target group through inclusive educational arrangements. The primary target group of the project comprises young adults without any disability or psychological issues or those coming from disadvantaged sociocultural backgrounds. The secondary target group encompasses all young adults aged 18-35, while the working group consists mainly of female educators over 40 years old.

Among the project's objectives are to encourage the participation of young adults exhibiting Hikikomori traits or at risk of them in educational activities, to enhance educators' skills in recognizing signs of isolation and including these individuals in educational experiences, and to raise awareness of the Hikikomori concept and organize preventive education sessions

Project activities include the development of an "assessment tool" to aid in measuring the degree of isolation associated with Hikikomori, organizing "Hikikomori Web Seminars" as initial awareness-building events, and conducting research on existing best practices at the European level and contributing to focus working groups from partner countries.

Hikikomori

The expression "Hikikomori" originates from the combination of two Japanese words: "hiki," signifying "to withdraw," and "komori," indicating "to be inside". This term was introduced by Japanese psychiatrist Tamaki Saito, who observed numerous young individuals in Japan during the 1990s displaying severe tendencies of social withdrawal (Lin et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of "hikikomori" in Japan refers to the withdrawal of adolescents and young adults from society, often characterized by staying indoors for extended

periods, avoiding social interactions, and sometimes even reversing their sleep schedules. This behavior has garnered attention as a significant social problem in Japan since the 1990s.

Hikikomori is not just a labor-related issue like NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) but also a psychological problem. The term covers a range of psychiatric conditions, including schizophrenia, affective disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, personality disorders, and pervasive developmental disorders. However, it also encompasses individuals who don't exhibit obvious mental disorders.

Symptoms & Diagnosis

Initially, hikikomori was perceived as a phenomenon exclusive to Japanese society; however, more recently, similar occurrences have emerged in numerous other countries and garnered widespread attention in the global media. In 2010, the Oxford Dictionary included a new entry for "hikikomori," indicating its acknowledgment and relevance beyond the confines of Japanese culture ("Hikikomori," 2010).

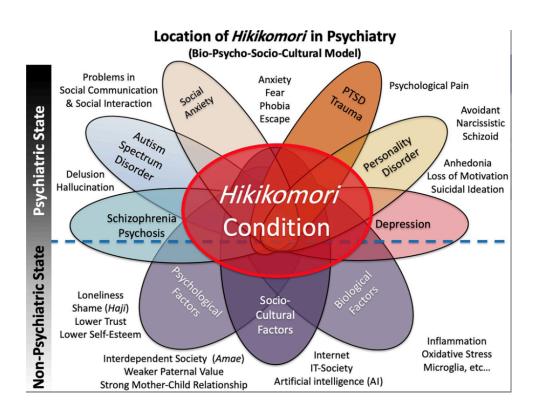
Reports indicate that hikikomori is often found alongside various psychiatric disorders. Currently, it remains unclear whether these psychiatric disorders precipitate hikikomori as a symptom or if hikikomori itself triggers the development of coexisting psychiatric conditions. Therefore, both scenarios are considered plausible. In the following section, we present a concise overview of comorbidity concerns within each psychiatric disorder associated with hikikomori-like symptoms.

Comorbidities

- 1. Schizophrenia and Psychotic Disorders: In schizophrenia, individuals may withdraw physically due to hallucinations or delusions, such as feeling pursued by the Yakuza or fearing electromagnetic waves. Social withdrawal, a common negative symptom, can be difficult to differentiate from non-psychotic hikikomori, especially in cases of "simple schizophrenia" lacking hallucinations or delusions. The inclusion of schizophrenia in the hikikomori definition has been debated, with attention to physical withdrawal in prodromal-stage psychosis cases.
- 2. **Depression:** In depression and bipolar disorder's depressive phase, decreased motivation and anhedonia can manifest as withdrawal-like behaviors akin to hikikomori.
- 3. Social Anxiety Disorder and Anxiety-related Disorders: Social anxiety can lead to hikikomori, with taijin kyofusho, a fear of interpersonal interactions, and

- sharing similarities. Comorbidities with avoidant personality disorder are common among personality disorders.
- 4. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Trauma-related Disorders: Hikikomori sufferers, especially those with truancy or bullying experiences, may exhibit symptoms resembling PTSD, although bullying alone might not meet diagnostic criteria.
- 5. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): ASD-like tendencies, including social maladjustment and susceptibility to bullying, may contribute to hikikomori.
- 6. Other Mental Illnesses and Neurodevelopmental Disorders: Comorbidity with intellectual developmental disorder and adjustment disorder, particularly "idiopathic hikikomori," has been recognized.
- **7. Suicide:** Hikikomori may precede suicide as individuals seek to escape reality, suggesting it as an alternative suicidal behavior. Research indicates hikikomori is a risk factor for suicide, warranting further investigation.

Figure 1. Hikikomori and Comorbidities ¹



The complexity of hikikomori, emphasizes that it's not merely a matter of behavioral withdrawal but can involve underlying psychological conditions. Additionally, it points out the lack of long-term prognosis data for individuals experiencing hikikomori, indicating a need for further research and understanding of this phenomenon (Suwa & Hara, 2007)

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https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pcn.12895

Procrastination

When exploring a concept, referring to a dictionary definition can be the initial step toward understanding, as dictionaries provide a shared foundation. Merriam-Webster defines *procrastination* as the intentional and habitual postponement of tasks that should be done. Etymology, the study of word origins, also contributes to understanding. The word "procrastination" derives from the Latin "procrastinatus," combining "pro-" meaning forward with "crastinus" meaning tomorrow, suggesting a tendency to delay actions into the future ("Definition of procrastinate," 2023).

The integrated definition of procrastination, proposed by Klingsieck (2013), emphasizes the voluntary delay of important activities despite foreseeing negative consequences. In everyday life, procrastination is a common phenomenon, with prevalence rates estimated to be as high as 20–25% in the general population. While there are slight differences in procrastination tendencies between genders and across age groups, the correlations found in studies are of limited informative value due to their small effect sizes and large sample sizes. Numerous studies have linked procrastination to negative outcomes, including detrimental effects on subjective well-being, health, financial well-being, and academic performance (Klingsieck, 2013).

Causes & symptoms

The causes of procrastination illustrate the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon and highlight the diverse psychological, cognitive, and emotional factors that contribute to procrastination behavior. According to Balkis and Duru (2007), there are several factors may cause procrastination:

- Poor Time Management: Difficulty in effectively allocating time to tasks and prioritizing activities
- **Feeling Overwhelmed:** Sensation of being inundated with tasks, leading to avoidance of responsibilities.
- Lack of Motivation: Absence of internal or external drive to initiate or complete tasks.
- Lack of Organizational Skills: Inability to structure tasks or manage resources efficiently.
- Inability to Concentrate: Difficulty maintaining focus or sustaining attention on tasks.
- **Fear and Anxiety Related to Failure:** Anxiety or apprehension about the potential outcomes or consequences of task completion.
- Negative Beliefs About Capabilities: Holding pessimistic views about one's ability to accomplish tasks.

- Personal Problems: External or internal issues affecting emotional well-being or mental health.
- Unrealistic Expectations: Setting overly ambitious or unattainable goals, leading to procrastination as a coping mechanism.
- **Perfectionism:** Striving for unattainable standards of perfection, leading to avoidance of tasks to avoid perceived failure.

• Cognitive Styles:

- o Self-Downing: Engaging in negative and disparaging self-talk.
- Low Frustration Tolerance: Difficulty in tolerating frustration or discomfort associated with task completion.
- Hostility: Holding hostile attitudes towards oneself or others, contributing to avoidance behaviors.

Cognitive Variables:

- Irrational Beliefs: Holding distorted or irrational beliefs about oneself, tasks, or the world.
- External Attribution Styles: Attributing failures or setbacks to external factors rather than internal abilities or efforts.
- Time Beliefs: Holding beliefs about time that may hinder task initiation or completion.
- Anxiety and Low Self-Efficacy: High levels of anxiety and low self-efficacy are predictors of increased procrastination in everyday non-academic activities.

Predictors

Procrastination is a rather complex concept to definitively address. It can be a symptom of various psychological disorders as well as a response to trauma or a coping mechanism for dealing with stress. The etiology of this concept, for which making definite judgments is difficult, is not clearly defined, but it is possible to mention some predictors. According to the research conducted by Steel and Ferrari (2013), the predictors of procrastination are as follows:

- **Sex**: Men tend to procrastinate more than women due to higher levels of impulsiveness and lower levels of self-control
- Age: Procrastination prevalence rises significantly during undergraduate schooling, peaking in the mid-twenties; with maturity, conscientiousness increases, leading to decreased procrastination (Schubert & Stewart, 2000; Steel & Ferrari, 2013).
- **Nationality:** Procrastinators are often young, single men with lower education levels residing in countries with reported lower levels of self-discipline.
- Personality type

- **Neurobiological Correlates:** Procrastination is influenced by the interplay between the limbic system and prefrontal cortex, and shares attributes with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Behavioral Problems: A higher prevalence of behavioral problems among boys may contribute to their lower success rate in college compared to girls
- **Executive Function:** Poor executive function capacities, controlled by the prefrontal cortex, contribute to challenges in overcoming procrastination.

Hikikomori & Procrastination

Our secondary search yielded no direct evidence linking hikikomori and procrastination. Therefore, it's important to acknowledge that this is more of an assumption based on theoretical connections and it's essential to recognize the speculative nature of this assertion. Thus, we must approach this link with caution, understanding that it lacks empirical support. Nonetheless, exploring potential connections between hikikomori and procrastination can still provide valuable insights, albeit within the framework of our project's objectives rather than rigorous scientific research.

While we recognized that procrastination and hikikomori share commonalities in psychological factors, cyclical patterns, and underlying mechanisms, we acknowledge the need for a more focused exploration. Both phenomena may indeed be influenced by similar psychological factors like depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and feelings of inadequacy, while also exhibiting cyclical patterns perpetuated by stress and isolation. Additionally, they may share underlying mechanisms such as difficulties with emotion regulation, impulsivity, or executive functioning.

When we closely examine *Procrastination* and *Hikikomori*, we notice similarities in categorization. Before making assumptions about psychological illness or syndromes while discussing these concepts, a holistic perspective should be adopted. One common aspect of these two concepts is that they may be utilized as **strategies for coping with stress.** Scholars argue that hikikomori could be interpreted as a response to stress, manifesting as a "condition of hikikomori," distinct from the presence or absence of mental illness in a narrow context. Certain forms of hikikomori may represent a specific coping mechanism akin to avoidance strategies triggered by social situations and judgments (Kato, Kanba, and Teo, 2019). Accordingly, procrastination may serve as a coping mechanism to postpone the negative emotions linked with a specific task or assignment (Iprato, 2024).

Procrastination and hikikomori may both be associated with **excessive internet use.**Procrastinators use the internet / online activity as a tool for procrastination.
Procrastination often involves spending excessive amounts of time on the internet,

engaging in activities such as browsing social media or watching videos as short-term mood optimization (Reinecke et al., 2018)). Similarly, individuals experiencing hikikomori may also spend a significant amount of time online, using the internet as a means to escape from the outside world. There is a separate training module dedicated specifically to internet addiction, thus this module will concentrate on specific commonalities between the two.

One of the specific theoretical connections that can be drawn between the two phenomena is dependent on the fact that both procrastination and hikikomori exhibit **avoidance behaviors** in different contexts. Procrastination involves avoiding tasks or responsibilities (Eerde, 2021), while hikikomori entails withdrawing from social interactions. This shared tendency towards avoidance suggests underlying psychological vulnerabilities that contribute to the development and perpetuation of both phenomena. Understanding the intricate dynamics of avoidance behavior can provide valuable insights into addressing the complex interplay of factors driving both procrastination and hikikomori. By exploring the commonalities in avoidance behavior, researchers may uncover deeper connections between these seemingly distinct phenomena and develop more nuanced approaches for intervention and support.

By narrowing our scope to avoidance behavior, we aim to thoroughly explore its manifestations, underlying mechanisms, and implications across various contexts. This focused examination will allow a comprehensive understanding of avoidance behavior independently of specific associations with procrastination and hikikomori. Through this approach, we can develop a basic foundation for future research endeavors while gaining insights that may inform broader discussions on psychological phenomena.

Adolescence

Another theoretical connection that can be drawn between the two phenomena is their occurrence within adolescent populations (Procrastination: Danne et al., 2023; Hikikomori: Kato, Kanba & Teo, 2019). Both hikikomori and procrastination manifest in individuals during this critical developmental stage. Therefore, this module will adopt a focused approach specifically on **avoidance behavior in adolescence**, aiming to elucidate potential strategies for early identification and intervention to support mental health and well-being in this vulnerable population.

Before proceeding to the discussion on avoidance behavior in adolescence, it is crucial to briefly investigate **adolescence** since it marks a critical developmental stage characterized by myriad physical, psychological, and social changes. Adolescence, spanning from ages 13 to 19, with its roots often beginning in the preteen years, embodies a tumultuous yet transformative journey from childhood to

adulthood. This transitional phase is characterized by profound physical and psychological changes, prompting adolescents to grapple with questions of identity, independence, and belonging.

Navigating through academic pursuits, friendships, sexuality, and substance use, teens confront a myriad of choices that shape their emerging sense of self. Egocentric tendencies are common, as adolescents focus inwardly amidst a swirl of insecurities and societal pressures. Anxiety about physical development and social acceptance looms large, alongside the emergence of serious mental health conditions. Divided into early, mid, and late stages, adolescence presents unique challenges at each juncture, demanding tailored support from parents and caregivers. Ultimately, the purpose of adolescence lies in facilitating the psychological and social metamorphosis necessary for individuals to transition into independent young adults, carving out their distinct identities and roles in society ("Adolescence," n.d.)

Adolescence and Family/Culture/Society

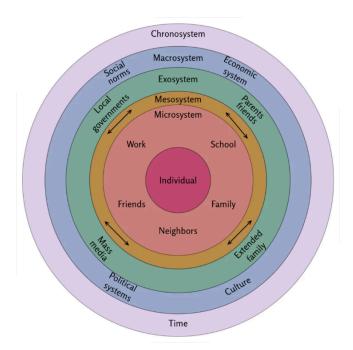
Adolescence and Bronfenner's Ecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model stands out as one of the most comprehensive and valuable frameworks for understanding adolescent development in contemporary research. This model delves into both proximal factors like family, school, and peer influences, as well as more distant factors such as culture and public policy. It particularly highlights the advantages of considering the interactive and synergistic effects of multiple environments (mesosystems) in developmental studies and critiques current applications of ecological models (Garbarino, Governale, 2020).

Figure 2. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model²

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 $^{^2\,\}underline{\text{https://www.simplypsychology.org/bronfenbrenner.html}}$



Understanding these foundational aspects of adolescence is essential for comprehending how avoidance behaviors manifest and impact adolescents' lives. These behaviors can serve various functions, including coping with stress, avoiding anxiety-provoking situations, or seeking relief from overwhelming emotions. By exploring the interplay between adolescence and avoidance behavior, we can gain insights into the underlying motivations and mechanisms driving these behaviors and develop strategies to support adolescents in navigating this challenging stage of development.

Adolescence and Mental Health

During adolescence, many mental health conditions that adults face can begin to surface, with one in five young adults experiencing a diagnosable disorder. Yet, teens may also grapple with transient feelings of anxiety, depression, or distress that are part of normal development. Distinguishing between typical challenges and clinical issues can be challenging, but seeking guidance from school counselors or mental health professionals is crucial when in doubt. Parents can play a vital role by recognizing early warning signs, fostering open communication, and seeking timely intervention, thus mitigating the escalation of mental health concerns and facilitating effective management or treatment ("Adolescence," n.d.)

Procrastination and Avoidance Behaviour

Procrastination, characterized by the avoidance of tasks or responsibilities, and hikikomori, marked by extreme social withdrawal, both exemplify avoidance behaviors with profound implications. By focusing on avoidance behavior in the context of procrastination and hikikomori, we can unravel the intricate dynamics

that contribute to these phenomena. Understanding the underlying mechanisms of avoidance in these contexts can provide valuable insights into the psychological barriers individuals face, the impact on their daily functioning and well-being, and avenues for effective interventions and support strategies to address these challenges.

Avoidance: Motivations for procrastination are multifaceted, extending beyond mere avoidance of unpleasant tasks. While some instances of procrastination may stem from a lack of conscientiousness, chronic procrastination often involves more psychological factors. complex emotional and Research that procrastination may serve as a mechanism for impression management and self-protection. By delaying tasks, individuals postpone the inevitable judgment of their performance, thereby safeguarding their self-worth from potential criticism. Studies have shown links between procrastination and self-esteem, with individuals exhibiting low self-esteem being more prone to procrastination due to self-doubt or fear of evaluation. Procrastination can also function as a form of self-handicapping, allowing individuals to attribute failure to external factors and preserve their self-image. Impressively, procrastination patterns shift based on the context of indicating nuanced interplay evaluation, a between avoidance self-preservation. In essence, procrastination often emerges as a defensive response to the threat of negative evaluation, whether from oneself or others, highlighting its complex nature beyond simple task avoidance (Tangney et al., 2000).

Procrastination and Avoidance Behaviour in Adolescence

The concept of the intention-action gap suggests that procrastinators struggle with self-regulatory skills like self-control, emotion regulation, motivation regulation, time management, and learning strategies. Thus, procrastination may be discussed as a self-regulatory failure and thus interventions typically focus on **supporting individuals in maintaining their initial intentions**. However, Grund and Fries propose an alternative perspective, suggesting that procrastination occurs when individuals pursue goals that don't align with their personal values and basic needs. They argue that from this viewpoint, procrastination isn't necessarily irrational but can stem from a misalignment between externally imposed goals and **personal values** (Grund & Fries, 2018).

Academic procrastination is a prevalent challenge faced by adolescents and young adults in educational settings. It involves delaying academic tasks despite knowing the negative consequences associated with such delays. Milgram and Marshevsky (1995) have identified academic procrastination as a significant issue among college students, drawing more attention from researchers and professionals compared to other forms of procrastination.

This type of procrastination encompasses both postponing tasks and experiencing personal distress over the delay. Furthermore, surveys indicate that a substantial proportion of individuals, including adolescents, recognize procrastination as a major hindrance to their educational endeavors (Steel & Ferrari, 2013). Studies suggest that academic procrastination affects a large portion of the student population, with estimates ranging from 10% to 70% among post-secondary students (Schubert & Stewart, 2000; Steel & Ferrari, 2013)

For instance, Balkis and Duru (2007) reported a high prevalence of academic procrastination among American college students, with 95% admitting to procrastinating on academic tasks. These studies highlight the significance of academic procrastination as a pervasive issue impacting adolescents and emphasizes the need for further understanding and intervention strategies to address this challenge.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while there are evident parallels between hikikomori and procrastination, it is crucial to approach their relationship with caution due to the limited number of studies demonstrating a clear correlation. Although both phenomena involve avoidance behaviors and coping mechanisms in response to stress, the extent of their connection requires further empirical investigation. Therefore, it is imperative to exercise critical thinking and methodological rigor when exploring the potential commonalities between hikikomori and procrastination. Future research endeavors should aim to elucidate the nuanced dynamics between these two concepts to advance our understanding of their interplay and implications for mental health and well-being.

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