



## **The Meaning Crisis of Youth in A World of Risky Strangers: Mental Disorders and Suicides**

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### **Keywords**

Youth, Risky world, Uncertainty, Mental disorders, Suicide, Meaning crisis.

### **Abstract**

Today, it is possible to say that the prevalence of mental disorders, completed suicide and suicide attempts are come to the fore in many countries in the world and show an increasing tendency among younger individuals. These seemingly obvious problems of the liquid modernity or risk century we live in, can be related to the sense of meaninglessness of young people. In this context, this study is aimed to examine and discuss the liquid social conditions of the 21st century, which have a potential to create meaning crisis and increase mental disorders and suicide attempts, from a sociological perspective through various approaches and institutional macro empirical statistics. For this purpose, it has been tried to relate meaning crises arising from the conditions of today's age with the increasing rates of mental disorders and suicide cases among young people. Various statistical data derived from current data archives of WHO, OECD and TurkStat constitute the empirical data of this work. According to the arguments that arises, in a world of risky strangers which is based on constant consumption and hedonism, the process of young people's making their lives meaningful is getting more difficult. Structural features of the liquid or late modernity such as the spread of risk and fear culture, the erosion of trust, the glorification of materialistic values, the spiritual and emotional emptiness, the tendency to consume more, loneliness, alienation and individuation make the individuals more unhappy, tired, fragile, stolid, worried, anxious and stressful, and ultimately creating a very intense meaning crisis. Given the existing mental disorders and suicide statistics, it appears that poor reformist policies or strategies for the prevention of the meaning crises of the new age societies often fail to solve the meaninglessness problem of individual's. If the existential needs of the unhappy, anxious and isolated young individuals of the new age are not adequately satisfied, their meaning crises will become more inevitable.

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## 1. Introduction

Today, it is possible to say that the prevalence of mental disorders, completed suicide and suicide attempts are come to the fore in many countries in the world and show an increasing tendency among younger individuals. These seemingly obvious problems of the liquid modernity or late modernity (Bauman, 2012) we live in, can be related to the sense of meaninglessness meaning crisis of young people. It is also possible to define the liquid time in which we live as a risk (Beck, 1992) and fear (Furedi, 2002) society or age of uncertainty in many ways. According to Delibaş (2015:13), among the prominent features of this age are the increase in uncertainties in all areas of social life, the spread of fear and risk culture, reflexive modernization and extreme individuation, the erosion of trust, [strangeness], the decline of trust towards authority and the deterioration of cultural authority.

In this sense, the world in which we live today is a fraught and dangerous one (Giddens, 1996:10). Individual insecurity and social isolation are what helps stimulate the image of a world of risky strangers. Such anxieties invariably raise the question, who can you trust? (Furedi, 2002:125). In this sense, in the liquid or late-modern risky world we live in, people become uneasy due to uncertainty, constant threats or insecurity. In this framework, “we live in a world where uncertainty and contingency constitute the very essence of the modern, and it has only been certain groups – like les philosophes – and processes, such as nationalism, that denied the fragmentary and fluid nature of the modern condition” (Moratta, 2002:40).

In addition, the transition from modernity to liquid modernity or postmodernity “has brought about the *question of value* at local and global scale. Considering the effects of consumption culture and new communication technologies on the individuals, it can be said that the problem of value is getting complicated in the [liquid] time we live” (Şimşek, 2017:68). Value is directly related to the meanings of the people they attribute to the world. According to Berger and Luckmann (1995), modern pluralism has led to values systems and explanation schemes becoming totally relative. In other words, the sanctity of the old value systems and the explanation schemes was deconstructed. This chaos and ambivalence, for Bauman (1993), represent the true nature of the liquid or fluid modern social world (Moratta, 2002:40)

The fact that the liquid or late modern lifestyles are mostly based on hedonic consumption has led to the fact that the value of life is equivalent to the consumption capacity. What is tragicomic in the consumer society is that the people themselves become a consumption object while consuming (Şimşek, 2017:71). As a consequence, Baudrillard (1998:181) stated that fatigue, as a collective syndrome of the post-industrial societies, thus represents one of the profound anomalies, one of the dysfunctions of prosperity. The heroes of consumption are tired. Various interpretations for this may be advanced on the psycho-sociological level. Instead of equalizing opportunities and reducing social competition (economic and status competition), the consumption process makes competition more violent and more acute in all its forms (Baudrillard, 1998:182). This means that the individuals built the meaning that they attribute to themselves

and to their environment on the basis of hedonic consumption and on the endless competition with others. The culture of consumption, entertainment and speed in the liquid or postmodern era lead to the people into uneasy, tired and anxious mood. These moods of individuals are often accompanied by meaning crises.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1995), it is not clear whether talking about the meaning crisis of today's world will correspond to a new loss of orientation in the life of people. Could this mean that we only hear the last repetition of an old mourning? Could this be the complaint of people suffering in a more changing world? Or is this an expression of suspicion that allows people to find meaning in life? Or is this a hopelessness that the lack of meaning reveals? For Eagleton (2007:97), the assumption that the meaning of life is primarily an individual affair is still alive and well. Similarly, Julian Baggini (2005:86) writes that the search for meaning is essentially personal, involving the power and responsibility to discover and in part determine meaning for ourselves. In this way, the question of to what extent is the life worth living requires a deep thought. Because, people are constantly in search of a meaning in their lives (Yalom, 2001:662; see also Frankl, 2010).

In the 21st century societies the sense of meaninglessness is widespread because of the people's search for meaning often fails (Frankl, 2010; Eagleton, 2007; Baggini, 2005). According to Şentürk and Yakut (2014:46), rapid changes and developments to improve quality of life have not prevented the contemporary individuals from encountering problems such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, desperation, pessimism, violence and psychological trauma. The most important reason why humanity is exposed to this tragedy is the problem of existential meaning.

In any case, as Yıkılmaz and Güdül (2015:301) pointed out, it is assumed that there is a positive relationship between meaning in life and goodness (see Zika and Chamberlain, 1992) and life satisfaction (see Ang and Jiaqing, 2012; Ho et al. 2010). Existential goodness is, as a dimension of spiritual well-being, that individual builds a fundamental meaning of life and maintains his life accordingly (Acar, 2014:395; see Scott and Agretsti, 1998, Poloutzian and Ellison, 1982). People who have difficulty to make sense to their life often face with mental problems such as depression and anxiety. Furthermore, the individual who fails in the search for meaning can even attempt to commit suicide.

The societies of the new age have many means to produce meaning and to make individuals feel stronger in the face of problems, or they are in many quests. However, there is also a widespread acceptance that these mechanisms are not able to prevent the spread of meaning crises. In a world that is perceived as surrounded by risks and threats, young people's effort to build meaning for their lives and getting rid of emptiness is becoming more difficult. Those who are not satisfied enough and who fall into a feeling of emptiness begin to show mental disorders. As a result of such disorders, it is more likely that attempting to commit suicide as a way of getting rid of feeling of meaninglessness. Therefore, the sense of meaninglessness for the person is a fatal issue. In this context, it is important to discuss the dimensions of the meaning crises that individuals and especially the younger people face in the 21st century from a broad perspective.

## **2. The Scope of Work and Basic Data Sources**

Berger and Luckmann (1995) argue that in late capitalism the distortion of culture, loss of meaning, alienation of human beings, meaning inflation in mass society and complaints about it are quite widespread. As a matter of fact, mental disorders and

suicide phenomena, which seem to be a result of individual factors on a micro scale as one of the most important problems of the 21st century societies, are in fact closely related to social, cultural, economic, moral and religious features of societies. In this framework, the causes of suicide vary considerably from society to society or culture to culture. The cultural structures of the societies and the ways in which the individuals make sense of the world are also shaping the meanings attributed to suicide actions. Today's risky world has led people to look anxious and fearful about their future. Although the liquid or late-modern society has many possibilities for individuals, it has not been able to prevent feelings of insecurity, fatigue, hopelessness, inadequacy and dissatisfaction and has left the individuals with a very intense meaning crisis.

In this framework, this study is aimed to examine and discuss the liquid social conditions of the 21st century, which have a potential to create meaning crisis and increase mental disorders and suicide attempts among young people, in particular from a sociological perspective through various approaches and institutional macro empirical statistics. For this purpose, it has been tried to relate meaning crises arising from the conditions of today's age with the increasing rates of mental disorders and suicide cases among young people. In addition, the issue of mental disorders and suicide is addressed in a global and local context based on the unique conditions of the liquid times.

Various statistical data derived from current data archives of WHO<sup>2</sup> (World Health Organization), OECD<sup>3</sup> (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) and TurkStat<sup>4</sup> -TÜİK- (Turkey Statistical Institute) constitute the empirical data of this work. In this way, global and local data for mental disorders and suicides are examined in detail and presented graphically. The presented data have been tried to be put into a theoretical context in which the structure of the age which have potential to create meaning crises is discussed.

### **3. Findings**

#### **3.1. Mental Disorders in the World**

Mental illness or disorders represent a considerable and growing proportion of the global burden of disease. According to a recent study published by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2015), 322 million people worldwide are suffering from depression. This indicates that the proportion of the global population with depression in 2015 is estimated to be 4.4%. Graph-1 shows the distribution of 322 million cases of depression in the world population (detected in a 12-month period) by WHO regions.

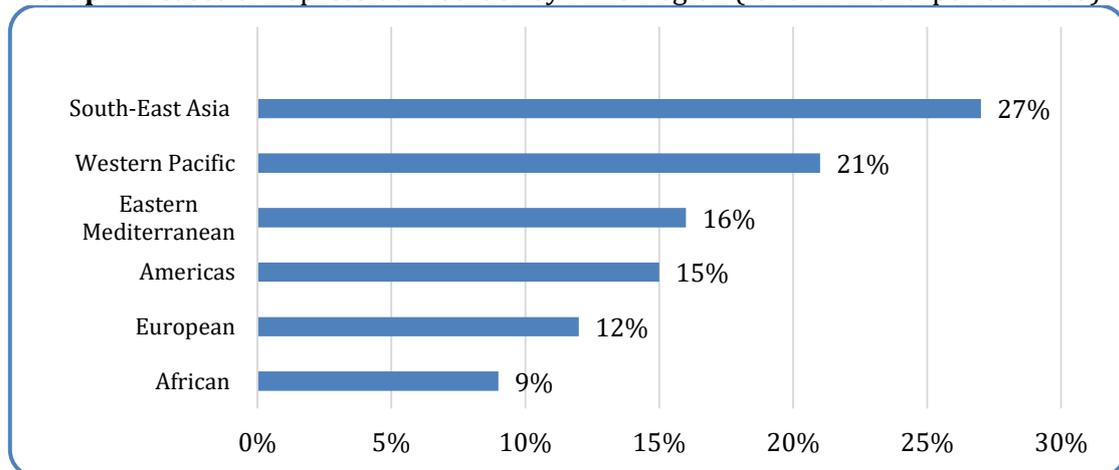
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<sup>2</sup> WHO: World Health Organization, <http://www.who.int/whosis/en/>

<sup>3</sup> OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development <http://www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/health-data.htm>

<sup>4</sup> TurkStat (TÜİK) Suicide statistics have been published together with death statistics since 2017. <http://www.tuik.gov.tr>

**Graph 1.** Cases of Depressive Disorder by WHO Region (for a 12 month period-2015)



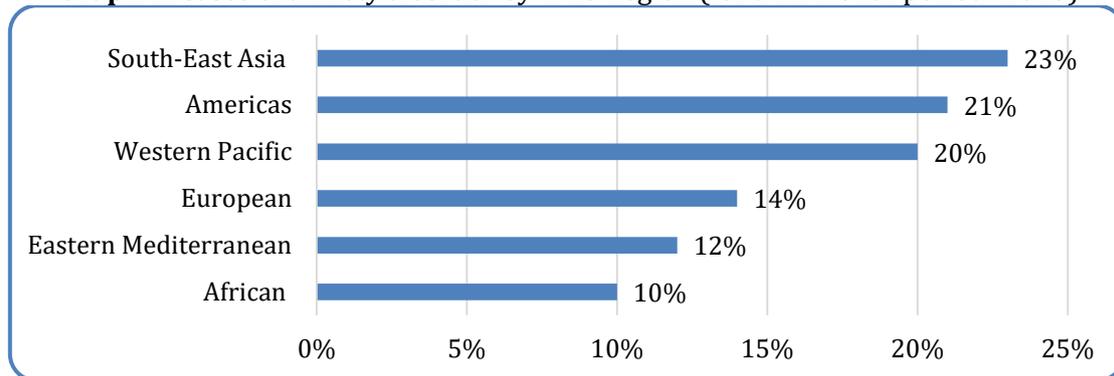
**Source:** WHO (2015) Global and regional estimates of prevalence depression, <http://ghdx.healthdata.org/gbdresults-tool>.

WHO's report (2015) states that worldwide *depression* rates have increased by 18.4% over the 10-year period. In the WHO report, it is stated that the number of people living with depression is increasing in all the countries of the world, although it is higher in low-income countries. Depression is more common among females (5.1%) than males (3.6%). In addition, the most common age group for depression is the young age category.

According to the findings of the OECD (2012 and 2015), an estimated one in two people will experience a mental illness in their lifetime, and around one in five working-age adults suffer from mental ill-health at any given time (OECD, 2012; OECD, 2015). Depression alone affects millions of individuals each year. For example, in Europe, on average, 12-month prevalence of depression was 7.9% of the population. It is also stated that the depression is more common among females than males in all countries.

Similarly, according to WHO (2015) data (for a 12 month period), *anxiety disorders* corresponds to 3.6% of the global population. The estimated number of people living with anxiety in the world is 264 million. Worldwide anxiety disorders rates have increased by 14.9% over the 10-year period. As with depression, anxiety disorders are more common among females than males (4.6% compared to 2.6% at the global level). In addition, the incidence of anxiety appears to be close to each other in all age groups. Graph-2 shows the distribution of 264 million anxiety cases in the world population by region.

**Graph 2.** Cases of anxiety disorder by Who Region (for a 12 month period -2015)



**Source:** WHO (2015) Global and regional estimates of prevalence anxiety disorders, <http://ghdx.healthdata.org/gbdresults-tool>.

According to the findings of WHO (2015), depression and anxiety have increased due to unemployment, poverty, loss of a close relative, termination of a relation, illness, alcohol and drug abuse. McDaid et al. (2017) argue that when people are suffering from a mental disorder, it has significant consequences across their lives, contributing to poorer educational outcomes, higher rates of unemployment, and poorer physical health. In serious cases depression and other mental illnesses, such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, can lead to people harming themselves, or even dying from suicide. There are other complex reasons that contribute to the rate of death by suicide. The social context, poverty, substance abuse, and unemployment are all associated with higher rates of suicide (OECD, 2017:60)

### 3.2. Suicide Cases in the World

It is accepted that individuals suffering from mental disorders and other variables are the greatest risk of suicide in the world. For example, the most common cause of suicide is untreated depression, as 90% of individuals who commit suicide are depressed. It is possible to say that recently completed suicide cases and suicide attempts have become more visible in many countries around the world and increasingly increasing among young people in particular.

The concept of suicide, in terms of lay terminology, is understood as completed suicide. World Health Organization (WHO) (2017) defines suicide as the act of intentionally causing one's own death. For Emile Durkheim (1897/1951) (in his work of *Suicide: A study in sociology*), suicide is applied to every case of death which results directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act, carried out by the victim himself, knowing that it will produce this result.

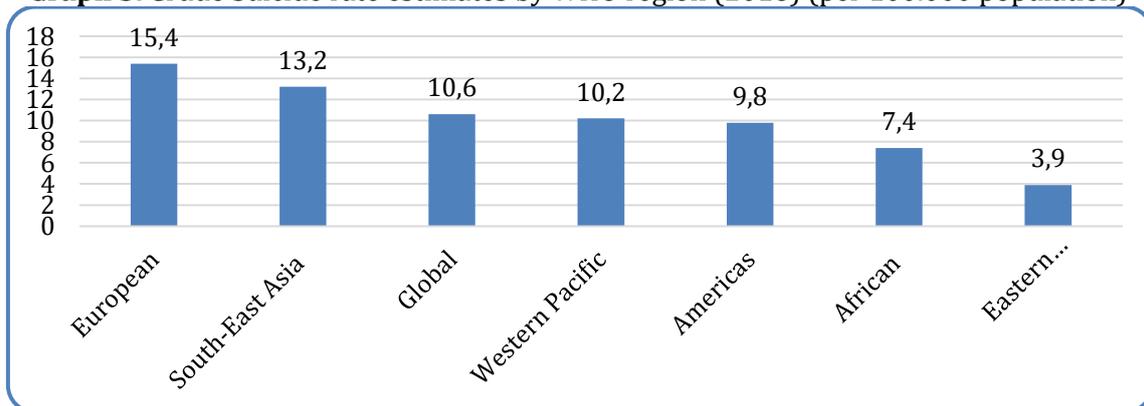
The concept of suicide includes sub-concepts such as self-harm, attempt, intention and thought, which are related to suicide (Osman et al., 2001:443). For example, Stengel and Cook (1958:29) consider suicide attempting behavior as an aid request and indicate that it must be precisely separated from the concept of completed suicide. In this sense, suicide attempts are actions that do not result in death. The first is the completed suicide action resulting in death, and the second is suicide attempts that the person intends to harm himself but fails. The difference between completed suicide and suicide attempts is also reflected in the statistics. Many studies show that the rates of suicide attempts are higher than the number of completed suicides. There are studies showing that suicide attempts

are much more than completed suicides (see WHO, 2015, 2016, 2017; OECD, 2015; Hulten et al., 2000; Diekstra and Gulbinat, 1993).

According to the WHO (2015) global findings, suicide is ranked 17th leading cause of death in 2015. In this sense suicide accounted for 1.4% of all deaths worldwide. In the global suicide prevention report of WHO (2015), which examines suicide cases as a global phenomenon, it is stated that more than 800 people die each year due to suicide, and many more are attempting suicide. It is also known that every twenty suicide attempts resulted in one death. It means that every 11 per 100,000 population in the world have lost their lives in the result of suicide. In other words, there is a suicide attempt every 3 seconds when suicidal death occurs every 40 seconds. Also, according to WHO data, every 13 per 100,000 population between the ages of 15-24 lose their lives as a result of suicide. Suicide is the second most common cause of death between the ages 15-29. These indicate that the frequency of suicide cases around the world, especially in the younger generation, is higher than in other age groups.

WHO's 2016 data indicate that on average, the crude suicide rate<sup>5</sup> (the number of suicides per 100,000 population) in the world is 10.6 (Graph-3). This number was 10.5 in 2015 and 11.5 in 2010. Although there is some fluctuation in crude suicide rate compared to years, there is a high average suicide rate which is above 10 in the last 6 years.

**Graph 3.** Crude Suicide rate estimates by WHO region (2016) (per 100.000 population)

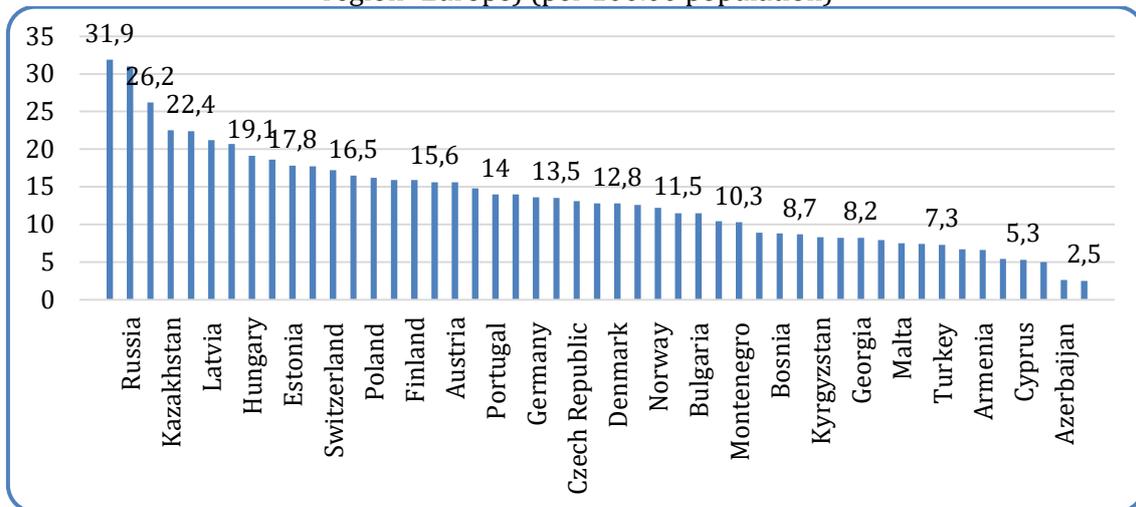


**Source:** WHO (2016) Crude Suicide rate estimates by WHO region, <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/view.main.MHSUICIDEREgv?lang=en>

According to the Graph-3, when the crude suicide rates are evaluated by WHO regions, Europe comes first with (15.4) crude suicide rate. Followed by Southeast Asia (13,2); Western Pacific (10,2); Americas (9.8); African (7,4) and the Eastern Mediterranean (3,9). On the basis of gender, the crude suicide rates in all regions are more common among males (13.5) males than females (7.7).

<sup>5</sup> **Crude suicide rate:** It expresses the number of suicides per 100.000 population within a certain year.

**Graph 4:** Crude Suicide rate by WHO 2016 -distribution by country (in selected WHO region -Europe) (per 100.00 population)



**Source:** Crude Suicide rate estimates by WHO 2016 -distribution by country (Europe)  
[http://www.who.int/gho/mental\\_health/suicide\\_rates\\_crude/en/](http://www.who.int/gho/mental_health/suicide_rates_crude/en/)

When European suicide rates are evaluated, the top five are Lithuania (31,9), Russia (31), Belarus (26,2), Kazakhstan (22,5) and Ukraine (22,4). The last five are respectively Tajikistan (2,5); Azerbaijan (2,6); Greece (5); Cyprus (5,3) and Israel (5,4). Turkey is on the 42. rank among the European countries (with the 7,3 crude suicide rate) (Graph-4).

Similarly, according to the health data of OECD (2015), the number of deaths due to suicide is increasing every year. When assessed on the basis of countries that are members of the OECD, it will be seen that the rate of suicide varies considerably from country to country or from culture to culture. Because, cultural features of societies are shaping the meanings attributed to the suicide cases to a considerable extent. As exemplified by Alvarez (2002), suicide was promoted in the Vikings, by saying that those who died of natural causes, such as senility and sickness, could not go to paradise For Stoics, suicide is an individual choice, so life and death are the same (Cavan, 1965:15). In this framework, the rate of crude suicide is 12.4 per 100.000 population in OECD countries (2015). Crude suicide rates are 6 and below per 100.000 population in countries such as Greece, Turkey, Mexico, Brazil and Italy. The rates are 20 and over per 100.000 population in countries like South Korea, Hungary, Russia and Japan.

Unlike the frequency of depression, death rates due to suicide are common among males than females.

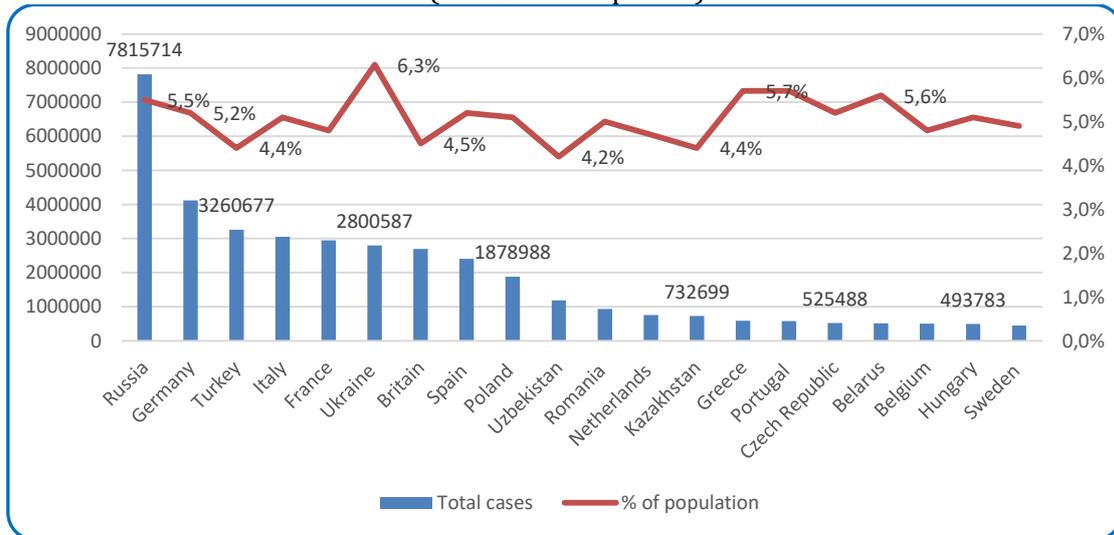
In suicide attempts, studies show that gender differences are lesser, but males tend to use more lethal means in suicide attempts. Moreover, suicide rates in younger individuals are significantly higher than in other age categories (OECD, 2017:60). Undoubtedly, suicide rates vary considerably from society to society or culture to culture. However, in countries that are members of the OECD, diseases such as schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder are important common causes of suicides. Besides these, there are other important causes such as biological and

genetic predispositions, physical illnesses, stressful bad economic conditions, alcohol and drug addiction, hopelessness, social isolation.

### 3.3. Mental Disorders in Turkey

According to WHO (2015) report, 4.4% of Turkey's population is suffering from *depressive disorders* -for 12 month period-. This rate corresponds to 3,260,677 people. Turkey, in terms of the total number of cases of depression seen among European countries, ranks third after Russia and Germany (Graph-5).

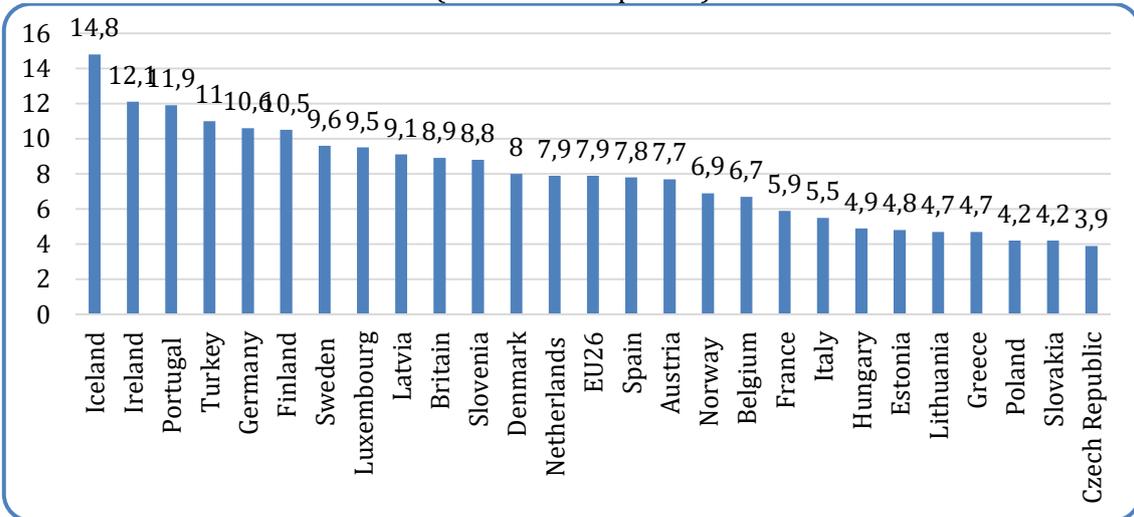
**Graph 5:** Depressive disorders by WHO European region 2015 (distribution by country) (for 12 month period)



**Source:** WHO 2016, Global Burden of Disease study 2015 <http://ghdx.healthdata.org/gbd-results-tool>, Country data shown are crude prevalence rates (not age-standardized).

Likewise to the OECD's (2014) data, Turkey is the fourth country among OECD countries seen most of the depression (Graph-6). The numbers show that 11 per 100.000 population suffer from chronic depression.

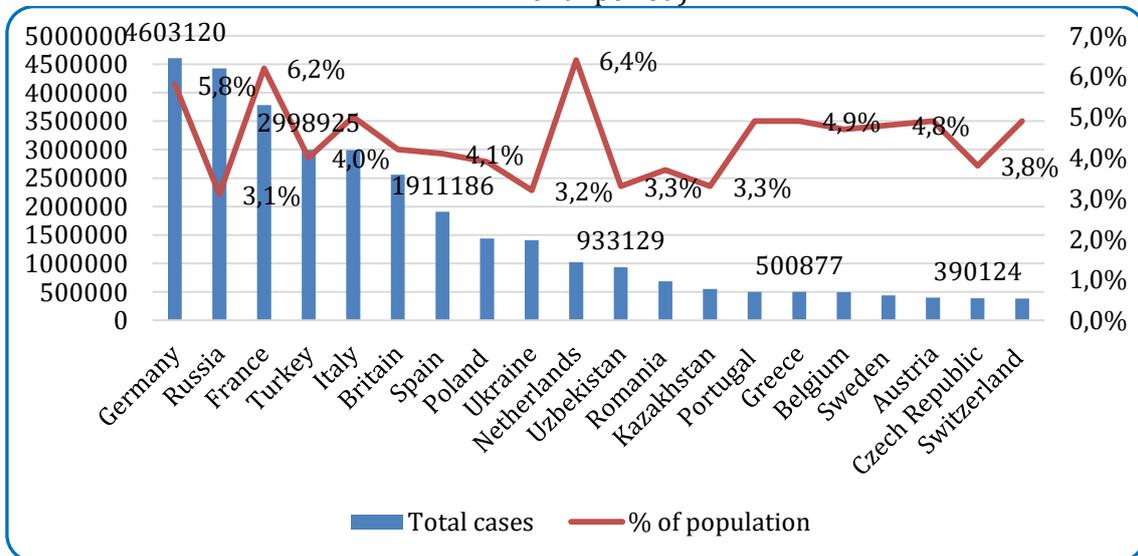
**Graph 6:** Chronic depressive disorders by OECD countries 2014 (per 100.000 population) (for 12 month period)



**Source:** OECD (2018) Health Statistic, <http://www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/health-data.htm>

For WHO (2015) report, 4.0% of Turkey's population is suffering from *anxiety disorders* -for 12 month period-. This rate corresponds to 2,998,925 people. Turkey in terms of the total number of cases of depression seen among European countries ranks fourth after Germany, Russia and France (Graph-7).

**Graph 7:** Anxiety disorders by WHO European region 2015 (distribution by country) (for 12 month period)



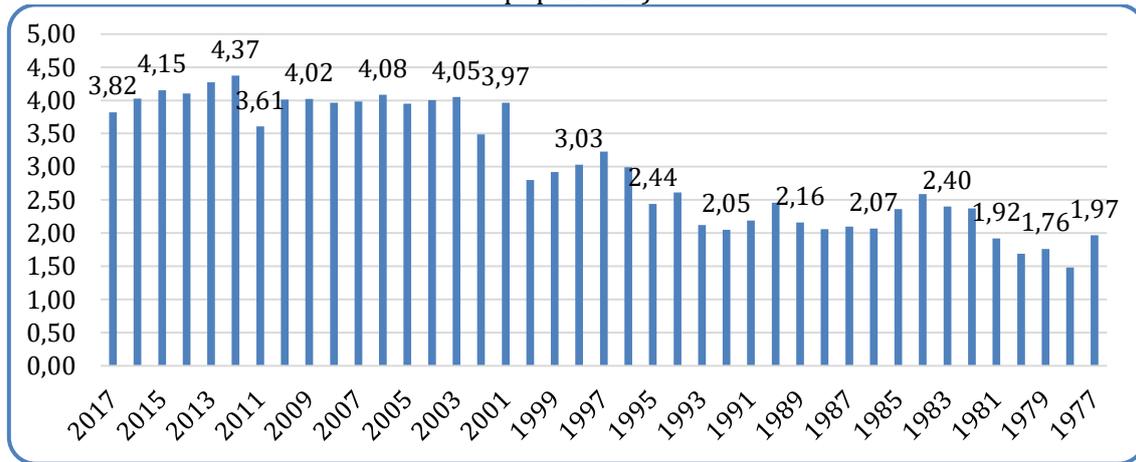
**Source:** WHO 2015, Global Burden of Disease study 2015 <http://ghdx.healthdata.org/gbd-results-tool>, Country data shown are crude prevalence rates (not age-standardized).

Eventually, when examining the rates on depressive and anxiety disorders, Turkey appears to be at the forefront among the world countries. These mentioned mental disorders are among the main causes of suicide mortality in societies. In this sense, mental disorders as a risk factor and social problem for societies need to be addressed all over the world as well as in Turkey.

### 3.4. Suicide Cases in Turkey

As in all the world, mental disorders are widespread in Turkey. As a result, the prevalence of completed suicide cases and suicide attempts, as a serious social problem, are progressively increasing. As one of the most important problems of the 21st century societies, suicide is one of the topics that psychiatry and psychology deal intensively, but it is not possible to make a permanent or long-term solution unless it is considered sociologically.

**Graph 8:** The last 40 years crude suicide rate in Turkey by TurkStat/TÜİK (per 100.000 population)



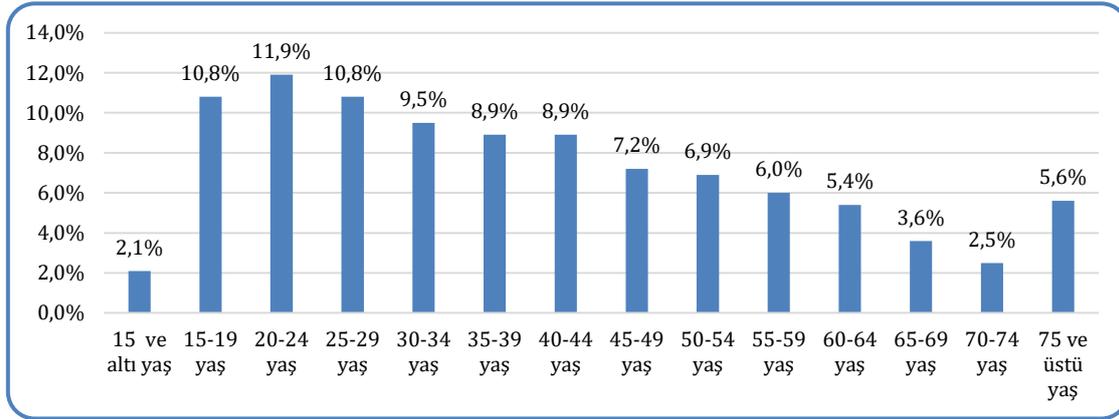
**Source:** The data has been compiled from TurkStat (TÜİK) (2017) suicide statistics.  
<http://www.tuik.gov.tr>

According to TurkStat suicide statistics, the number of completed suicides in Turkey by 2017 is 3069. This corresponds to 3.82 crude suicide rate. In other words, in Turkey nearly four per 100.000 population lost his life due to suicide. Considering the last 40 years suicide rates in Turkey (except for periodical fluctuations in certain years) it is understood that completed suicide cases constantly increasing (Graph-8).

In 2017, the proportion of male who lost their lives as a result of suicide was 77.2% (2,368) while the proportion of females was 22.8% (701). In this sense, nearly 3 out of every 4 people who lost their lives due to suicide in Turkey is male. These rates also overlap with the statistics in many other countries of the world. According to WHO and OECD reports, when the general averages of the countries are evaluated, it is seen that completed suicides are three times more common among males than females.

Compared with other countries in the world, although Turkey is located among the countries which has lowest crude suicide rate, it can be said that completed suicide and suicide attempts among young people have become more visible in recent years.

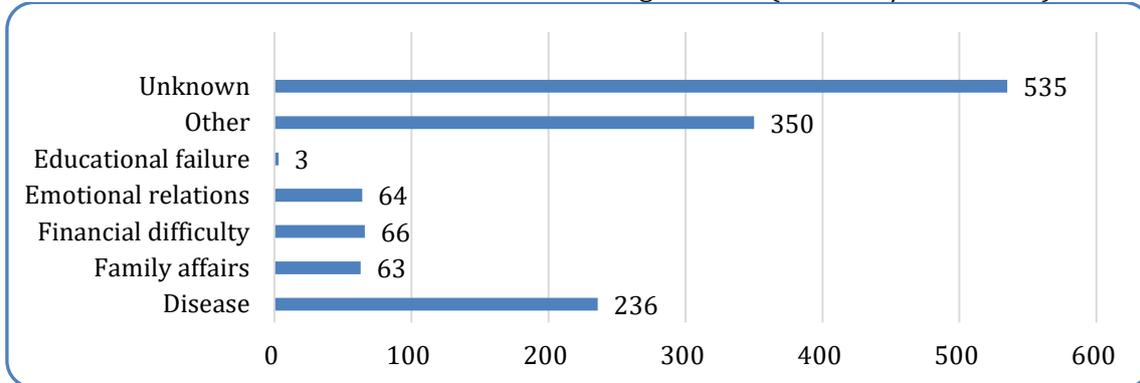
**Graph 9:** Suicide rates by age group in Turkey (TurkStat/TÜİK 2017)



**Source:** The data has been compiled from TurkStat (TÜİK) (2017) suicide statistics.  
<http://www.tuik.gov.tr>

43% of those who committed suicide in 2017 in Turkey ranges from 15-34 years. Also, suicide cases are mostly seen between the ages of 20-24 (Graph-9). According to the reports of the World Health Organization and many scientific studies carried out internationally in this regard, in almost all countries in the world completed suicides are more common among males than young females. In this sense, completed suicide rates are 3-4 times higher in young males than females. Suicide attempts are more common among females than males.

**Grafik 10:** Causes of suicide between the ages 15-34 (TurkStat/TÜİK 2017)



**Source:** The data has been compiled from TurkStat (TÜİK) (2017) suicide statistics.  
<http://www.tuik.gov.tr>

In 2017, a total of 1317 suicide cases occurred among young people aged 15-34. The cause of most suicide cases is unknown. Among the known ones, the cause of disease comes first. This is followed by financial difficulty, emotional relations and family affairs (Graph-10). The fact that the causes of suicide are mostly unknown necessitates a specific explanation.

It should also be pointed out that the potential for *suicide attempts* among young people is much higher.

Especially suicide attempts can be seen more among young people study at high school or graduate level. According to widely accepted view, among the most common causes of suicide in this age group is that of mental illness (such as anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia). But, there are other causes

beyond the realm of mental illness such as traumatic experience, bullying, personality disorders, drug addiction/substance abuse, eating disorders, unemployment, social isolation/loneliness, relationship problems, genetics/family history, terminal illness, chronic pain, financial problems, prescription drugs, parental separation or divorce, parental death, domestic disputes, low level of parental education.

However, one of the most important points is that regardless of the social and demographic characteristics, it can be said that the people who have weaker social tie with community and less spiritual satisfaction or who attribute inadequately meaning to their lives are more at risk in terms of suicide attempt. For example, in Durkheim's (1897/1951) approach, suicide is treated as a social phenomenon that varies according to the social ties of individuals and the strong or weak form of these ties. The four different types of suicide that Durkheim defines as egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic are related to the level of integration of individuals into social and symbolic structures. For example, egoistic and anomic suicides are more common in modern post-industrial societies based on organic solidarity, where the level of collective consciousness and solidarity is low and social integration is problematic. Hence, problems of meaning or meaninglessness, particularly in young people, become more apparent in a century surrounded by risky strangers where social solidarity and ties are weakened, the anomie is intensified, and the individuals are alienated to themselves and their surroundings. For this reason, mental illnesses or disorders and suicide cases are becoming more prevalent.

As a result, mental disorders and the phenomenon of suicide have entered into the interests of many different disciplines over time. The ways in which different disciplines handle this phenomenon vary according to how they evaluate it. In fact, emphasizing the social and cultural dynamics of mental disorders and suicide does not mean to deny the views of other disciplines directed at it. Therefore, sociological explanations about these phenomena are complementary to those of psychology, psychiatry and other disciplines. In this direction, it would be appropriate to assess mental disorders such as depression and anxiety and suicide cases, which are becoming increasingly common as global phenomena, on the basis of meaning crises of youth created by the new century where uncertainties, dangers and risks are common. As Berger and Luckmann (1995) pointed out, the production and transmission of meaning in the new age has turned into a crisis, and the most important factor that constitutes the meaning crises in the lives of individuals is modern (or post-modern) pluralism. Because modern pluralism has damaged knowledge. The world, society, life and individual identity began to be questioned.

### **3.5. Anxious, Tired and Hopeless Youth Living in A World of Risky Strangers**

Today, it is a widespread belief that societies are becoming more and more at risk (Furedi, 2002:15). The dimensions of uncertainty and erosion of trust have begun to be discussed together with the transition from modern to (late-modernity or liquid modernity) postmodern society. In today's societies we live in, there is a sense of insecurity, uncertainty, fear and anxiety for the future, starting from the

Western societies and spreading to many parts of the world (Delibaş, 2015:65; see Beck, 1992; Furedi, 2002; Mythen and Walklate, 2006; Renn, 2017). As Salecl (2004) noted, it seems that in this age of anxiety individuals are becoming able to imagine all kinds of catastrophes for the future. In an age where each individual turn into a universal stranger, nobody is strong enough to preserve their place. In other words, when individuals are not able to develop a sense of belonging to any place, they remain just as lonely individuals or strangers.

According to Bauman (1999), the most common troubles and discomforts of people today ensue from an exchange, but what is sacrificed this time is security. Berger et al. (1973) define the dissatisfaction caused by the pluralism of modern social life as homelessness in general. The pluralistic nature of today's society has made the individual ever more migrant and ever-changing. In this sense, in the face of the hazards or risks of liquid world, or in a situation where people have lost their place or belonging to anywhere, it can be said of a strangeness stuck in every human being (Şimşek, 2016:333). As Bauman (1990:63) pointed out, "the world we live in seems to be populated mostly by strangers; it looks like the world of universal strangerhood. We live among strangers, among whom we are strangers ourselves". In a similar way Furedi stated that;

*"...individuation without a parallel process of reintegration into some new social network can contribute to the creation of an atmosphere of mistrust. In particular it has the effect of altering the interactions between people. Where once neighbours and colleagues might have been seen as friends and allies, today they are more likely to be perceived as competitors and as potential threats. Of course people are not really at war with each other. The incidence of crime, warring neighbours and harassment at work is much exaggerated. However, once the familiarity of a common endeavour and outlook is undermined, things begin to look different. Other people start to look like strangers instead of friends..." (Furedi, 2002:141).*

As Rumford (2013) emphasized, one consequence of this is *that* the enhanced *strangeness* of social life means *that* life may well be experienced as *more* uncertain: "many people experience their own global *world* as threatened by *universal strangeness*" (Beck, 1998:134). In a universal strangerhood, uncertainty, insecurity and distrust have begun to create some unpredictable consequences for social life. Increasing uncertainty and weakening of trust do not only affect people's relationship with themselves, but also affect their relationship with others. Also, there are no reliable solidarity networks in which the people feel themselves in safe and meet their hopes and expectations. Therefore, increasingly individualized and lonely people are afraid that something will happen to them at any time among in a world of risky strangers. To describe this issue, Bauman used a remarkable metaphor:

*"...living under liquid modern conditions can be compared to walking in a minefield: everyone knows an explosion might happen at any moment and in any place, but no one knows when the moment will come and where the place will be. On a globalized planet this situation is universal - no one is exempt from this and the consequences to be born..." (Bauman, 2012:14)*

In another aspect, the diminished role assigned to human subjectivity also implies a redefinition of our humanity. The association of human relationships with risk helps to consolidate a life of permanent alertness. Such attitudes breed suspicion and the disposition to panic (Furedi, 2002:64). Thinking that you can face a threat at any time creates constant stress and pressure. Thus, people continue to live with the thought of anxiety and negativity (Şimşek, 2017:71). This anxiety and negativity has become the basic feature of today's tired and hopeless individuals. Thus, as Baudrillard (1998:181) pointed out, just as there is a world hunger problem, so there is now also a worldwide problem of fatigue:

*"...just as the new violence is 'objectless', so this fatigue is 'groundless'. It has nothing to do with muscular fatigue or lack of energy. There is, of course, much spontaneous talk of 'nervous strain', of 'depression' and psychosomatic illness. This kind of explanation is now part of mass culture: it is in all the newspapers. Everyone can fall back on this, as though it were something that could now be taken for granted, and can hence derive gloomy pleasure from being a martyr to their nerves. Admittedly, this fatigue signifies one thing at least: this society which claims to be - which regards itself as being - in constant progress towards the abolition of effort, the resolution of tension, greater ease of living and automation, is in fact a society of stress, tension and drug use, in which the overall balance sheet of satisfaction is increasingly in deficit, in which individual and collective equilibrium is being progressively compromised even as the technical conditions for its realization are being increasingly fulfilled..." (Baudrillard, 1998:182).*

Within this framework, Şimşek (2017:72) argue that because of insecurity and uncertainty, the individual lives an uneasy and dissatisfied life with the syndrome of being incapacitated or inadequate. It is clear that in the liquid times, the individual is not yet well equipped for these postmodern cultural conditions. The problem for the consumer individual in seeking a good life is the constant change of good living criteria. The problem here is, for Bauman (1995), that there is no definition of good life.

In fact, the mentality that perceives happiness [or good life] and consumption as equivalent constitutes the main basis of the capitalist system in late-modern times. People who live by making pleasure the most basic purpose of their life are in an effort to keep pace with a culture based on materiality, aesthetics and constant change (Odabaşı, 2009:32). With regard to this, Baudrillard (1998:182) indicates that rather than matching up aspirations, needs and satisfactions as it claims to do, this society creates ever greater disparities both among individuals and among social groups who are wrestling, on the one hand, with the imperative of competition and upward social mobility and, on the other, with the - now highly internalized - imperative to maximalize their pleasures.

Therefore, an individual who is totally focused on pleasure-based (or hedonic) consumption lacks in discovering and producing something new. This feeling of deprivation leads to descent into desperation. Therefore, unproductive people descent into desperation over time and life becomes more meaningless to them

(İmamoğlu and Yavuz, 2011:225-226). Indeed, the main distress in today's societies is that we are paying too much attention to consumerism, independent from the production process, and glorifying the human model who lives accordingly to this false value (Martı, 2010:37). People who are focused on hedonic consumption glorify materiality and measure their own value with it.

Eventually, as stated by Furedi (2002:70) “the coincidence of the process of extreme individuation, consumption and alienation with a mood of social pessimism helps to produce a sense of cynicism regarding the merit of social engagement. This lack of belief in the problem-solving ability of human beings helps to heighten the sense of vulnerability. It is this convergence of insecurity with the sense that we have run out of answers that makes society feel that it is entitled to panic”. This whole process represents the tired, uneasy, bored, fragile, anxious and hopeless young people profile of the liquid new age. This is particularly relevant to the degree of meaning that young people attribute to themselves and their environments. The meaninglessness and sense of emptiness which are the most distinctive feature of today's youth can lead to increase mental based disorders or crises.

### **3.6. Meaning Crisis of Youth: Mental Disorders and Suicide Cases in Liquid Times**

When life seems void of meaning, people tend to question why they are even living and/or the entire purpose of their existence. In many cases, people facing an existential meaning crisis or mental disorders consider suicide because they feel as if their entire existence is void of purpose (Mental Health Daily, 2014). As stated by Aydın et al. (2015: 44), the most important reason why the search for meaning today is becoming a vital necessity is that in spite of the rapid progresses and radical changes in the social, cultural and economic spheres unresolved existential problems are turned into powerful existential emptiness. Thus, the distinct feature of society today is not the unprecedented flowering of the individual but the weakening both of a sense of collectivity and of individual aspiration (Furedi, 2002:142). For 21st century's troubled, uneasy, tired and anxious youth, life can be managed just by building a satisfactory meaning for life. As a matter of fact, according to Yalom (2001), the issue of meaning or meaninglessness of life is generally a deeply question related with every individual. In this sense, one of the primary aims of the people is undoubtedly to comprehend the meaning of self and his or her actions (Lindbom, 1997:7).

Berger and Luckmann (1995) emphasized that the meaning is built in the consciousness of the individual. Again, for them, meaning is nothing more than a complex form of consciousness. According to the existentialist approach, meaning in life is the basic motivation that makes individuals life meaningful. In other words, meaning is a set of purposeful behaviors. To make life meaningful, we need to find satisfying answers to the liquid world in which we live. For this reason, the individual is always in search of meaning to get rid of tediousness. As Pargament (2002) stated, the search for meaning of human beings is dynamic. The quest for meaning is a process involving exploration, protection and, if necessary, efforts to recreate important purposes and values. The individual who shows this effort questions consistently whether life is worth living for, whether it has been experienced in a manner appropriate to human dignity, whether it

fulfills the expectations of itself. So, individuals try to make sense of their life (Bahadır, 2011:9).

In the same vein, Aydın et al. (2015:44) indicate that on the basis of the logoterapical thought, people have to struggle to reach their life's precious essence, which corresponds to the search for meaning. There are studies that focus on the relationship of mental health with the existence of meaning in life. According to these studies, meaning is positively correlated with positive psychological components such as happiness (Chamberlain and Zika 1988; Steger et al., 2011), well-being (Bonebright et al., 2000) and social affinity (Ryff 1989) (see Çelik, 2016:134). In another research, it has been concluded that having a sense of meaning in life affects the psychological and physiological health positively (Meraviglia, 2001).

From these results, it can be said that the sense of meaning that the individual reaches or creates after certain stages has a leading role in every area of life, especially existential issues (Acar, 2014:396; see also Dykstra, 1986; Fowler and Lovin, 1980; Fowler and Keen, 1978). Indeed, self-actualized people perceive the reality and things that are happening positively and can tolerate more uncertainty. Individuals who successfully complete the search for meaning try to perceive themselves, their environment and all kinds of reality positively. This enables them to protect their hopes by making them more resistant to all kinds of uncertainties, difficulties and troubles. But, the unsuccessful individual in this quest is surrounded by a sense of meaninglessness. In spite of the many of possibilities which make life easier that the 21st century have presented, young people are feeling the sense of meaninglessness often very intense. Meaninglessness is that people feel purposeless, unplanned and do not know what direction they will go (Çelik, 2016:134; see Harlow and Newcomb 1990). According to the definition of Yalom (2001:660), meaninglessness means that there is nothing worth living for, struggling and hoping for; it is a feeling of not finding any purpose or direction in life.

The increasing sense of meaninglessness and accompanying sense of worthlessness are associated with mental health negatively (Battista and Almond 1973; Zika and Chamberlain 1992; Frankl 2010). When people experience lack of meaning in their lives, they are likely to experience a high level of distress and adversely affect their health (Çelik, 2016:134; see Ishida and Okada 2006). Similarly, Frankl (1998:19) claimed that existential neurosis is coincidental with the crisis of meaninglessness. Also, some argue that meaninglessness hinders the integrity of life and is therefore equivalent to illness (Aydın, 2016:58-59). As solutions appear to lose their relevance for people's lives who have a sense of meaninglessness, problems assume an overwhelming form. The absence of obvious solutions endows problems with extra weight and importance (Furedi, 2002:61).

From another point, the changes brought by the liquid or postmodern time, on the one hand, provide many conveniences to the people, on the other hand distract them from moral and religious structures and lead them to lose their references of meaning. For example, according to Berger et al. (1973), in modern and late-modern societies, confidence in religion has been increasingly declining. As a

consequence of this crisis of religion in modern society, social homelessness has transformed into a metaphysical structure, that is, it has become a problem of homelessness at the universe.

In fact, when we think that the homelessness problem is based on the rise of individuation and alienation in modern and late-modern societies, many of the warnings related to the destructive dynamic of individualism are based on the insights of 19th century sociologists like Durkheim. Durkheim (1964) claimed that the life-span of a society consisting of isolated individuals who pursued their own narrow interests would be short-lived. According to Durkheim, mealy-mouthed individuals who pursuing their self-interest undermined social solidarity. To overcome this danger, argued Durkheim, society required a morality of cooperation and a network of secondary institutions -such as churches, co-operative societies, professional associations etc.- which bound people together.

Indeed, individuals have had to pay a heavy price for being disconnected from moral and religious structures. Because people have lost their sense of meaning to a great extent, so they fell into a sense of meaninglessness. In the past, however, people could find tranquility by feeling themselves in a meaningful whole as part of a great cosmic order (Bahadır, 2002:131). In this manner, Terry Eagleton draws attention to the consequences of the sense of meaninglessness:

*"...people who find life meaningless are not complaining that they cannot tell what kind of stuff their body is made out of, or that they do not know whether they are in a black hole or under the ocean. Men and women whose lives lack meaning in that sense of the word are psychotic, not just down-hearted. They mean, rather, that their lives lack significance. And to lack significance means to lack point, substance, purpose, quality, value, and direction. Such people mean not that they cannot comprehend life, but that they have nothing to live for. It is not that their existence is unintelligible, merely empty. Someone whose life feels meaningless is more likely to reach for the suicide pills than for the dictionary..."* (Eagleton, 2007:37-38).

Indications of existential emptiness created by meaninglessness are: boredom, emotionlessness, insensitivity and be in a quandary (Çelik, 2016:134), hopelessness and desperation. Especially, insensitivity, hopelessness and desperation lead to loss of self-esteem. All of these indications have a potential risk in terms of losing self-esteem and being depressive. According to Frankl (2010:129), one of the most important reasons for lack of meaning is that people do not have something to live for, even if they have many things. That is to say, people have tools, but they have no purposes. This leads to meaninglessness and therefore psychological problems or mental disorders arises. In this framework, Beck et al. (1990) found that both depression and hopelessness are related to suicidal tendencies. Armstrong (2011) noted that it is not possible for people to tolerate emptiness and loneliness. As Kızılgöç (2015) indicated, suicide attempts are seen as a solution or a way out to the helplessness, [emptiness] and hopelessness of a person. As people become hopeless, helpless or desperate, their self-esteem diminishes. Low self-esteem plays a significant role in suicide attempts. When self-esteem diminishes too much, the individuals lose their hope to

regain it and deepens their despair with unrealistic thoughts. This deepened sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness is reflected in the statistics of the century we live in. Shortly, meaning crises lead to increased or widespread mental disorders and suicide attempts, especially in younger generations.

As a result, many researchers today argue that the increase in individuation, as well as the disintegration of secondary institutions, has created a serious erosion of trust, anxiety and meaning crisis. The main legacy of the acknowledgement that society lacks solutions is the consolidation of a culture of uncertainty (Furedi, 2002:61). Yes, but is there a way to prevent this meaning crisis arising from the social conditions of postmodern societies or liquid times?

According to Berger and Luckmann (1995), this will only be possible by re-establishing intermediary institutions in today's society that link the individual with the action patterns systemized within society. Today's societies have invented new intermediary institutions for the production and transmission of meaning: different types of psychotherapy; sexual and vocational counselors; special courses and seminars for adult education; psychologically trained personnel and most importantly mass media. It is assumed that these intermediary institutions will serve to produce meanings and support the individuals, and to prevent the spread of the meaning crisis as a virus or epidemic. Indeed, the increase in individual guidance or counseling services that claim to help in the search for meaning is the clearest indication of the people's inability to cope with problems. However, it seems that all these new intermediary institutions are inadequate to solve the meaning crisis of today's individuals. Because, "the inability to cope, which is the fundamental assumption of the counselling revolution, is explained through the language of disease and addiction. Through the language of disease, a variety of experiences become medicalized. The most dramatic effect of the medicalization of experience is the invention of a variety of new disorders and conditions" (Furedi, 2002:92). Therefore, instead of strengthen people, these secondary or intermediary institutions (such as counselling) often reinforce the sense of helplessness and convince them that they are not be able to solve any problems on their own. Individuals who are not able to build meaning enough for their life feel themselves helpless, inadequate, weak and despair against the problems. Even worse, when the crisis become unbearable for people, mental disorders and suicide attempts become more likely.

#### **4. Conclusion**

According to the commonly accepted view, in today's world, individuals are more free or independent but deprived of the means of meaning that made people feel safe in the pre-modern era. We have witnessed the disappearance of more or less specific patterns of the past due to the weakening of social ties. People have become free or independent of relations that held them together in the past, whether they wanted to or not. But in the absence of new forms of social solidarity, this freedom only intensifies the feelings of loneliness, weakness and helplessness. As a matter of fact, this freedom has caused more and more anxiety, individuation, strangeness and alienation.

Risk or postmodern society has a structure that is incalculable or unpredictable. In this risky or liquid world, where every development is global, the risks are also increasing with the same developments. In a world of risky strangers, it is difficult to trust. Indeed, the fear of strangers and of risks is proportional to the decline of trust (Furedi, 2002:127). In liquid modernity where risks are constantly increasing, it is a serious problem that individuals have to solve the problems they face in alone. Because in the liquid world where unions (family, class, nation) are not long-lived, there are no structures or solidarity networks in which people can feel safe. In this risk society which is open to global impacts, people are more anxious and feel insecure because of the uncertainties.

An important structural feature of today's age, where insecurity and dangerous world perception is prevalent, is the physical proximity and mental distance between individuals. This feature pushes people to more loneliness and lead them to become withdrawn. Communication and interaction between young people in particular are not always face to face. Interactions that are mostly digital mediated also lack sincerity and trust. This communication and interaction style does not offer a meaningful, satisfying and trust-based relationship. This makes the individuals insensitive to themselves and to each other. Thus, young people are increasingly alienating.

The unpredictable social structure of this century, described by Beck (1992), limits the ability of people to act and makes them more pessimistic. In this framework, the relentless features of the age in which we live such as the spread of risk and fear culture, the erosion of trust, the glorification of materialistic values, the spiritual and emotional emptiness, the tendency to consume more, loneliness, alienation and extreme individuation make the individuals more unhappy, insatiable, uneasy, bored, tired, stolid, worried, anxious and stressful, and ultimately creating a very intense meaning crisis.

In this sense, Yalom (2001) stated that living without meaning, purpose, value and ideal creates considerable stress and anxiety. People search for sources of meaning that can be a safe haven for all the psycho-social distress they experience. People who are able to find solutions to their meaning crises can cope with many emotional problems and feel themselves valuable. However, the people will experience a much deeper sense of meaninglessness and emptiness when they are deprived of sources of meaning, especially in difficult moments. When the search for meaning is not adequately resolved, a general frustration or tiredness arises. In a life where meaning has not been built, the problem of worthlessness begins. At this point there is a strong correlation between meaningfulness and feeling worthwhile and valuable. Those who are not able to make sense to themselves and their surroundings also devalue themselves and the world they live in. In this sense, people can experience mental disorders when there is no real value to live for. Moreover, they can give up everything and try to end to their lives.

As a result, given the existing mental disorders and suicide statistics, it appears that poor reformist policies or strategies for the prevention of the meaning crises of the new-age societies often fail to solve the meaning problems of the individual's. The weakening of the social solidarity further strengthens the feelings of weakness, worthless and desperation. Moreover, the process of individuation

and erosion of trust create an intense sense of isolation. Hence, in societies of risky and uncertain 21st century which is based on constant consumption and hedonism, the process of young people's making their lives meaningful is getting more difficult. There is a youth profile who are becoming more alienated, individualized and isolated. In this sense, young people are very fragile and can easily give up in the face of many dilemmas or difficulties of life. Nevertheless, there is no satisfactory solution to the problem of individuals applying for intermediary institutions such as help groups and professional counseling services that postmodern societies have invented to artificially compensate for this isolation. Also, today the old structures or solidarity networks which are able to help people in the face of meaning crises have either disappeared or are having difficulty to survive. This indicates that in the near future, societies will face a much more severe meaning crisis that spreads like an epidemic. It is obvious that societies will pay a high price for this.

In this context, if the existential needs of the fragile, anxious and isolated young individuals of the new age or liquid times are not adequately satisfied, their meaning crises will become even more inevitable. Therefore, it can be predicted that with the increase of the meaning crisis in the 21st century mental disorders (such as depression and anxiety) and suicide cases will increase and the agenda will occupy with this issue more and more. Thus, we can say that youth-based studies on mental disorders and suicide will become more important. In this respect, it is necessary to deal with the issue of meaning crises and suicide cases in younger generations on the basis of their specific social and cultural dynamics. Moreover, it is necessary to encourage interdisciplinary work at various levels to address this issue.

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