

Family Processes in Adolescent Depression

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A developing body of research points to the role of family relationships and interactions as factors relevant to understanding unipolar depressive symptomatology and disorder in adolescents. This paper is focused on examining mechanisms by which adverse family processes may operate to increase adolescents' vulnerability to depression. The review is organized into a description and evaluation of four potential mechanisms by which families may influence adolescents' risk: (a) Stress/Support, (b) Social Interactional, (c) Cognitive, and (d) Affect Regulation. The presentation of the individual mechanisms is followed by a brief discussion of how they could be integrated to develop a fuller understanding of familial processes relevant to the etiology and maintenance of depressive conditions. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of overall limitations in the literature and recommendations for future research.

KEY WORDS: adolescent depression; family processes.

Although historically, theories of adolescent development have normalized both depressive mood and family discord as transient and expected aspects of the adolescent experience, this view has not been borne out by the developmental and clinical research of the last three decades (Elmen & Offer, 1993). The vast majority of youth meet the challenges of adolescence and pass through its numerous transitions unscathed. When, however, adolescents suffer true depressive episodes, the experience tends to be neither minor nor fleeting. In fact, the existence of unipolar depressive disorders, comparable in symptomatology, severity, and prevalence, to those observed in adults, is well established (Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts, Seeley, & Andrews, 1993; Poznanski & Mokros, 1994). Similarly, despite the modest increases in parent-adolescent disagreement that accompanies the normative redefinition of family members' roles and expectations in adolescence, there is a marked stability in the quality and emotional climate of family relationships, with most families maintaining the strong bonds that characterized their earlier parent-child

relationships (Conger & Ge, 1999; Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1999; Smetana, 1988). In fact, high levels of conflict or disengagement between adolescents and their parents are both nonnormative and associated with adverse developmental outcomes (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Of particular relevance here, is evidence that adverse family relationships appear to place adolescents at risk for depressive disorders and symptomatology (e.g., Kaslow, Deering, & Racusin 1994).

With the recognition of depression as a serious and prevalent disorder in youth, there has been a growing interest in the family context of unipolar depressive disorder and symptomatology. Although a part of the family contribution to depression is attributable to genetic mechanisms, a substantial portion of variance in prediction is unexplained by genetic factors (Eley, Deater-Deckard, Fombonne, Fulker, & Plomin, 1998; Fendrich, Warner, & Weissman, 1990; Jacobson & Rowe, 1999; Strober, 1995). Thus, in line with the growing recognition that depressive behavior exists in an interpersonal context (e.g., Gotlib & Hammen, 1992), increasing attention has been directed toward the role of family relationships and interactional processes as factors relevant to understanding depression in youth. Developing out of this latter tradition, this review is focused on

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examining mechanisms by which some forms of adverse family environments may result in adolescent depression.

We begin by providing a brief description of the prevalence and significance of adolescent depressive disorder and symptomatology. We note in this regard that the review will address family processes related to both depressive disorder and self-reported depressive symptomatology. We take this approach both because research on clinical populations represents a small proportion of the available literature and because, to date, findings appear to be similar across diverse samples; where the nature of the sample may have implications for interpreting the results, this is noted.

The core of the paper is focused on examining interactional family processes that may contribute to the development and maintenance of adolescent depressive symptomatology and disorder. We have organized this review into a description and evaluation of four mechanisms, each implicit in the research literature to date, by which family processes may operate to increase adolescents' vulnerability to depression. Our discussion of each mechanism will comprise a critical review of the empirical support for the mechanism as well as a discussion of the weaknesses and gaps in the literature that limit our understanding. Although these mechanisms are presented individually for heuristic purposes, they are clearly not mutually exclusive. Thus, we follow the presentation of the individual mechanisms with a brief discussion of how they could be integrated to develop a fuller understanding of familial processes relevant to the etiology and maintenance of depressive conditions. We would also note that as we are focusing on interactional processes, many structural and contextual variables often examined as risk factors for depression (e.g., maternal depression, economic stress, marital discord and dissolution) are addressed only in so much as they are hypothesized to impact interactional processes, particularly those between adolescents and parents. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the overall limitations in the literature and recommendations for future research.

PREVALENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF DEPRESSIVE CONDITIONS

Recent epidemiological studies estimate the point prevalence of adolescent unipolar depressive disorders to be between .4% and 8%, with 20% of

adolescents experiencing a diagnosable depressive episode by age 18 (Birmaher *et al.*, 1996; Lewinsohn, *et al.* 1993). Depressive disorders are associated with a range of psychosocial impairments and comorbid symptomatology (Cicchetti & Toth, 1998; Peterson *et al.*, 1993). Longitudinal data indicate that an episode of depression is a substantial risk factor for subsequent episodes both within adolescence and into adulthood (Birmaher *et al.*, 1996; Harrington & Vostanis, 1995), perhaps because depressive episodes appear to negatively impact future emotional, social, and occupational functioning (Bardone, Moffitt, Caspi, Dickson, & Silva, 1996; Rohde, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1994).

Additionally, rates of diagnosable depressive disorders underestimate the extent of the problem posed to adolescents by depressive conditions. Substantial numbers of adolescents demonstrate elevated, though subdiagnostic, levels of depressive symptomatology (Roberts, Andrews, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990). These adolescents are at increased risk of developing depressive disorders during adolescence and adulthood (Gotlib, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1995; Pine, Cohen, Cohen, Brook, 1999; Weissman, Fendrich, Warner, & Wickramaratne, 1992) and, moreover, present with many of the same social, clinical, and behavioral problems as do youth who meet diagnostic criteria (Gotlib *et al.*, 1995).

FAMILY PROCESSES IN ADOLESCENT DEPRESSION

Stress/Support Mechanism

Increasing evidence suggests that adolescents are at risk for depression as a direct consequence of ongoing exposure to adverse family environments characterized by the absence of supportive and facilitative interactions and, conversely, by elevated levels of conflictual, critical, and angry interactions. This model is consistent with evidence that ongoing minor stressors are more predictive of distress than are transient major events (Compas, 1987) as well as with early behavioral views of depression as resulting from an absence of rewards in the environment (Ferster, 1973; Lewinsohn & Attwood, 1969). This process may have particular import for children through adolescence in that extricating oneself from one's family is rarely a viable option and thus adverse family relations present a chronic and largely unavoidable stressor. Additionally, though adolescents spend increasing amounts of