

Adolescent Depression: Impact of Family Relations

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Abstract. Depression is a major mental disorder that affects numerous people and causes them to experience depressive episodes. The root of depression usually appears in people's teenage years. Research have shown that family relations, in particular, has the largest impact on the development and manifestation of depressive symptoms in teenagers. After reviewing pertinent literature, the specific components in family relations that are risk factors and protective factors for depressive symptoms in adolescents are identified. The risk factors for depressive symptoms in teenagers are mostly correlated with negative family emotions and actions, which includes parental criticism and expressed emotions, parental depression, lack of family cohesion and adaptability, lack of parental care, negative family emotional climate, and lack of physical affection and verbal intimacy. The protective factors revolve around adolescents' ability to recognize and manage negative emotions, which includes emotion regulation, positive family climate and social support, emotion coaching, emotion clarity, and cooperative communication. Four recommendations for parents are offered based on these observed risk factors and protective factors to hinder and prevent the development of depression adolescents. These recommendations are social support, positive family atmosphere, physical affection, and verbal affection. It is hoped that studies in the future can focus on investigating the effectiveness of these recommendations and provide a more detailed and reliable list of recommendations for parents to reduce the chances of depression development in their children.

Keywords: depression; adolescents; family relations.

1. Introduction

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), or depression, according to DSM-5, is defined as patient experiencing one or multiple major depressive episodes (MDE) with the no mania or hypomania episodes. In order to be diagnosed with an MDE, the patient needs to meet at least five symptoms out of all the symptoms listed below within a period of 2-week. These symptoms for MDE includes: 1) having an extremely negative or sad mood for the majority of time, 2) losing pleasure or interest in most of the daily activities and activities that were previously enjoyed, 3) significant changes in weight or appetite, 4) significant changes in sleep pattern (including both having difficulty falling asleep and having difficulty waking up), 5) psychomotor retardation or agitation for the majority of time, 6) experiencing tiredness or feeling a loss of energy most of the time, 7) Feeling worthless or excessive guilt on a daily basis, 8) having a hard time to concentrate or to make decisions nearly every day, and 9) having repetitive thoughts about suicide and death, suicidal imagination, or even attempts to actually commit suicide [1].

Although it may not appear to be so, depression is actually a common mental disorder affecting a lot of people. According to the American Psychiatric Association, approximately one-sixth of people will develop depression at some period during their lifetime [1]. On average, people with depression usually develop it during their late teenager years and experience more depressive episodes in the later years of their lives. In addition, women have a much higher chance of developing depression compared to men. Research have shown that approximately a third of women will develop depression at some point during their lifetime. From the genetics perspective, depression is highly heritable. Children will have approximately a 40% chance to develop depression if their parents have it [1].

Currently, there are a lot of misconceptions about depression in the society. Many people confuse depression with sadness and grief. They believe that depression, just like sadness and grief, can be

overcome if one tries hard enough. This might be true for some cases of depression. However, in most cases, patients with depression are suffering from extreme pain and are unable to push through without abundant medical and social support. It is important to educate people about the severity of depression as a mental disorder and illness to help patients treat their depression or even prevent the development of depression at the start.

In order to do so, it is necessary to understand the risk factors of depression and how to avoid these risk factors to reduce or even prevent depression from developing. According to American Psychiatric Association, there are four major factors that affects the development of depression—biochemistry, genetics, personality, and environmental factors [1]. Since the first three types of factors are hard to manipulate, the main focus for change and improvement should be on environmental factors. One study investigated the impact of environmental factors on depression among high school seniors and discovered that relationship with parents, among other factors, has the largest impact on the development of depression [2]. Another study focusing on family emotional climate suggested that the more negative the family climate the more likely adolescents in those families would develop depression. In addition, one study has also shown that parental care was negative correlated with the development of depression in adolescents. All of these studies suggest that adolescents' family can have a great impact on depression development. Thus, it is important to investigate the specific risk factors for depression in adolescents' families to fully understand adolescent depression and devise plans to prevent depression.

In short, this paper aims to investigate the relationship between family relations and depression in people's teenage years, a period when depression first appears, through literature review and propose potential methods to prevent the development of depression.

2. Adolescent Depression and Recommendations

2.1. Family Relations and Depression

Although some types of interactions between parents and adolescents serve as factors that poses risks for adolescent depression, there are other types of family interactions that function as protective factors that reduce depression symptoms and slow down depression development. In order to distinguish between these risk factors and protective factors, pertinent literatures are reviewed and discussed separately in the following sections.

2.1.1. Risk Factors

After reviewing pertinent literature, a variety of risk factors for depressive symptoms in teenagers are identified. These risk factors all revolve around a major theme: negative family emotions and actions. In one study, the researchers conducted a study among adolescents to investigate how parents' criticism towards adolescents and parents' expressed emotions in front of adolescents relate to the development of depression in adolescents. The results of their study showed that there was significant positive correlation between parental criticism and expressed emotions and adolescents' depressive symptoms [3]. This suggests that adolescents with parents that are more criticizing and emotionally unstable are more at risk of developing depression.

Another study employed survey measures targeting at both adolescents and their parents to find out what factors promote depression development and what factors hinder depression development. The result of the study showed that mental health symptoms in parents was the best predictor for adolescent depression. Furthermore, the presence of these symptoms in parents also bolstered the development of depression in adolescents [4]. Although parental depression is often considered as a genetic factor that poses risk for depression, the result of this research suggests that it may also serve as an environmental risk factor for depression since adolescents growing up in a depressive family atmosphere may also be negatively affected mentally and develop depression at a faster rate.

Researchers also investigated the how depression correlates with the level of family cohesion and adaptability and how the differences in the perception of these two factors affect depression. The result of the study showed that both family cohesion and adaptability were negatively correlated with adolescent depression, which means that as cohesion and adaptability of the family went up, the symptoms of adolescent depression decreased [5]. This finding of this study suggests that a family's ability to remain cohesive and adapt under severe circumstances can be a valid predictor for depression symptoms. The better the ability to remain cohesive and adapt, the smaller the chances of the family developing depression.

A study also investigated the relationship between gender and parental care and adolescent depressive symptoms using surveys and depression scales. The results of the study showed that although parental care levels did not differ by the genders of adolescents, parental care itself was negatively correlated with adolescents' depression [6]. This suggests that adolescents that don't receive sufficient levels of parental care will be more susceptible to developing depression compared to adolescents who received sufficient care.

Another group of researchers focused on the concept of negative family emotional climate (NFEC), which is the negative emotional atmosphere parents created in the family through demonstration of negative emotions and actions. This group of researchers investigated the relationship between NFEC and the development of depression in adolescents. Results showed that NFEC was positively correlated with adolescent depression, which means that as NFEC goes up, chances of adolescents developing depression would also go up. The researchers also found an indirect correlation between NFEC and cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression [7-8]. This suggests that adolescents growing up under a negative family emotional atmosphere will have a higher chance of developing depression and experience emotional suppression compared to their peers.

In another study, the researchers employed Likert scale questionnaires among high school seniors to investigate the risk factors in adolescent depression. The results of the study showed that poor parental relationship was most predictive of adolescent depression. Specifically, the adolescents who met the criteria of depression experienced less physical affection and less verbal intimacy with their parents and more paternal depression [2].

2.1.2. Protective Factors

After reviewing pertinent literature, several factors that mitigate the effects of adolescent depression and prevents the development of depression are identified. These protective factors are all related adolescents' ability to recognize and manage their negative emotions.

In the aforementioned study on parental criticism and expressed emotions and adolescent depression, the researchers also discovered that emotion regulation was a protective factor for depression [3]. This means that even though parental criticism and expressed emotions may increase the likelihood of adolescent depression, the presence of emotion regulation traits in adolescents can actually mitigate the effect of these risk factors and reduce the chances of developing depressive symptoms.

In the research that investigated the risk factors and protective factors, the researchers also found that the belief in one's ability to accomplish tasks, a positive and supportive family atmosphere, and attentive support from parents and as well as other close members were protective factors for adolescent depression [4]. This suggests that even though adolescents with depressed parents may be more at risk of developing depression both genetically and environmentally, if their parents put effort into creating a positive and supportive family atmosphere and providing attentive care, these risk factors may be mitigated.

In another study that investigated how emotion coaching correlated with depressive symptoms, the researchers found that emotion coaching was negatively correlated with adolescent stress and internalizing symptoms, which are risk factors for depression [7]. The results of this study suggest that a family atmosphere that supports adolescents to express and learn about their own negative

emotions will help them reduce stress and internalizing symptoms, which will in turn reduce the chances of depression.

In another study, the researchers investigated how emotional clarity correlated with depressive symptoms using Likert-style questionnaire. Emotional clarity is termed by the researchers as adolescents' ability to effectively identify their emotions and differentiate between different types of emotions and their causes. The results demonstrated that emotional clarity was negatively correlated with adolescent depression [9]. This means that adolescents who are more capable at recognizing and reconciling with their negative emotions are less likely to develop depression.

Another research investigated how the effectiveness of depression treatments was affected by adolescents' interaction with their parents. The results showed that adolescents who were not cooperative when engaging in conversations with their parents showed greater reductions in depressive symptoms after treatment [10]. This suggests that cooperative communication between family members may be an important protective factor for depression. Adolescents who didn't receive meaningful communication with their parents may be more likely to develop depressive symptoms. However, after they received the communication they need through treatments, their depressive symptoms were reduced.

2.2. Recommendations for Improvement

After the carefully reviewing the above literature, numerous family factors that may affect adolescent depression are identified. In order to address the risk factors and bolster the protective factors to reduce the possibility of the development of teenage depression, four recommendations are proposed for parents to improve their relationship with their children.

The first recommendation is to provide support for adolescents when they are experiencing negative emotions. As mentioned in the above studies, emotion clarity, emotion coaching, and emotion regulation are all identified as protective factors for adolescent depression [3, 7, 9]. The presence of these abilities can reduce the chances of depression development while the absence of them might lead adolescents to develop depression under stressful environments. The best way for adolescents to develop the ability to recognize and regulate emotions is to provide support for adolescents when they are experiencing issues with their negative emotions. By providing guidance and support for adolescents when they are having negative emotions, parents can guide their children to clearly recognize and reconcile with their negative emotions and help them develop emotion regulation skills. Doing so will also increase the level of parental care for adolescents, which will in turn reduce the likelihood of adolescent depression as shown in the above study [6].

The second recommendation is to create a positive family atmosphere. As shown in the above studies, a negative family emotional climate will increase the chances of adolescent depression while a positive family atmosphere will reduce the likelihood of adolescent depression. In order to create a positive family atmosphere, parents will need to refrain from expressing negative and depressive emotions in front of their children. Since both parental expressed emotions and parental depression are strongly correlated with adolescent depression, reducing these emotions in the family will also help reduce the chances of adolescent depression [3-4]. It is recommended that parents suppress their negative feelings and emotions when they are around their children. In this way, children would not be affected by the negative emotions from their parents, which will reduce the risks for the development of depression.

The third recommendation is to demonstrate physical affection. The above studies have shown that low physical affection between parents and adolescents is correlated with adolescent depression [2]. Therefore, it is recommended that parents demonstrate physical affection through physical contact and care when interacting with their children to reduce the chances of depression. Furthermore, increasing physical affection with adolescents can increase adolescents perceived parental care and family cohesion, which are both factors that have been shown to be negatively correlated with depression [5-6]. Thus, by increasing physical affection to make adolescents feel that they are being

cared by their parents and have a cohesive family atmosphere, parents will be able to reduce the chances of depression developing in their children.

The fourth recommendation is to show verbal affection. As shown in the studies above, lack of verbal intimacy and parental criticism are both risk factors for adolescent depression [2-3]. By using positive and intimate language when talking to their children, parents can increase verbal intimacy and reduce criticism, which will in turn reduce the likelihood of adolescent depression. In addition, by conversing with adolescents using intimate language, they will be more likely to engage in positive and open communication with their parents, which will also in turn reduce the chances of depression since studies have shown that cooperative communication with parents can be a protective factor for depression.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, depression is a major mental disorder that affects a lot of people. Since the first signs of depression usually occurs during people's later teenage years, it is important to understand what the risk factors for adolescent depression are to effectively avoid the development of it. Different studies have shown various risk factors for adolescent depression, such as parental criticism and expressed emotions, parental depression, lack of family cohesion and adaptability, lack of parental care, negative family emotional climate, and lack of physical affection and verbal intimacy. These studies have also revealed several protective factors for adolescent depression, including emotion regulation, positive family climate and social support, emotion coaching, emotion clarity, and cooperative communication. In order to prevent the development of teenage depression, it is recommended that parents provide support for adolescents when they are experiencing negative emotions, create a positive family atmosphere, demonstrate physical affection when interacting with their children, and show verbal affection and intimacy when talking to their children. Admittedly, this paper is limited in its ability to provide accurate and reliable recommendations without experimental data. It is hoped that future studies can investigate the effectiveness of these recommendations provided in this paper and refine and modify them to create an accurate list of recommendations that can actually help parents reduce the chances of adolescent depression.

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