

Family ties provide protection against young adult suicidal behavior

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Adolescents and young adults typically consider peer relationships to be all important. However, it appears that strong family support, not peer support, is protective in reducing future suicidal behavior among young adults when they have experienced depression or have attempted suicide.

New research that will be presented here April 17 at the annual meeting of the American Association of Suicidology shows that high school depression and a previous suicide attempt were significant predictors of thinking about suicide one or two years later. But, those individuals who had high levels of depression or had attempted suicide in high school were less likely to engage in suicidal thinking if they had strong family support and bonds. In addition, having a current romantic partner also reduced suicidal thoughts.

"Our findings suggest that the protective quality of family support and bonding, or having an intimate partner, are not replaced by peer support and bonding in emerging adulthood. In fact, it appears that older adolescents - 18- and 19-year olds - who maintain strong family ties are less likely to engage in suicidal thinking, regardless of their peer relationships," said James Mazza, a University of Washington professor of [educational psychology](#) and the lead researcher on two posters about the research being presented at the meeting.

By bonding, the researchers are referring to a person's closeness with his or her family, or a partner, enjoying spending time with them, and the ability to talk with them about important issues.

"Peers don't provide the same type of safety net that comes from a family or by having an intimate partner. When it comes to suicidal behavior, young adults may feel that their family or partner may be more accepting and less judgmental than perhaps some of their peers," said Mazza, who is past president of the American Association of Suicidology.

"This study suggests getting the family involved in adolescent treatment for depression or past suicidal behavior may be very important. It's also important that parents shouldn't give up on their adolescents because our work indicates they still rely on them in this kind of situation."

Data for the research was drawn from a larger National Institute of Drug Abuse 15-year study of youth in a Seattle-area school district that looked at risk factors for marijuana and cigarette use, binge drinking, depression and past suicidal behavior

Mazza and his colleagues also will present data from a second study that shows 18- and 19-year olds are accurate in reporting their previous childhood suicide attempts. Using the same group of students, data showed that 67 of them reported attempting suicide while in high school. The researchers found that the students' scores for depression were elevated in the same year they made their first suicide attempt.

Collecting information about suicidal behavior in minors is difficult because of liability issues, and Mazza said "depression scores are a pretty decent proxy for suicide. But we should be asking directly about suicidal behavior, not looking for a proxy or a substitute."

Source: University of Washington ([news](#) : [web](#))

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