

Early relationships influence teen pain and depression

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Angst could be more than a rite of passage for insecure teenagers, according to a study published in the *Journal of Pain*. Researchers from the Université de Montréal, Sainte-Justine University Hospital Center and McGill University have discovered that insecure adolescents experience more intense pain in the form of frequent headaches, abdominal pain and joint pain. These teens are also more likely to be depressed than peers with secure attachments.

Dr. Isabelle Tremblay, a researcher at the Université de Montréal and its affiliated Sainte-Justine University Hospital Center, and Dr. Michael Sullivan, a psychology professor at McGill University, launched this study to build on previous findings that childhood experiences play a major role in the relationships people develop in later life. Simply put: insecure infants grow up to be insecure adolescents, and later, insecure adults.

"Although previous studies in adults found that an individual's security level was influenced by painful experiences, it was not clear why relationship security should be related to pain," says Dr. Tremblay. "We found that adolescents with insecure relationships tend to be more 'alarmist' about their pain symptoms; they have a tendency to amplify the degree of threat or severity of their pain. This amplification leads to more intense pain and more severe depressive symptoms."

Some 382 students, from Grades 8 through 12, were recruited for the study from a francophone high school in Montreal, Canada. Participants

were asked to fill questionnaires on the frequency and intensity of their emotional and physical pain.

"It is possible that individuals who have insecure relationships may perceive the world as more threatening or more stressful and that manifests in physical symptoms," says Dr. Sullivan. "Alternately, it is possible that individuals who feel insecure might 'express' more intense distress as a means of eliciting support from others in their social environment."

Interpersonal factors must be considered when managing [adolescent](#) experiences of pain and [depression](#), according to the researchers. "Adolescents have different health and mental health needs than adults. Although interpersonal factors have not been considered integral component of the treatment of pain and depression in adults, these factors might need to be considered in the treatment of adolescents," stresses Dr. Sullivan.

More information: [The study](#), "Attachment and Pain Outcomes in Adolescents: The Mediating Role of Pain Catastrophizing and Anxiety," published in the Journal of [Pain](#), was authored by Isabelle Tremblay of the Université de Montréal / Sainte-Justine University Hospital Center and Michael J. L. Sullivan of McGill University.

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