

A mother's suicide, more than a father's, predicts her offspring's likelihood of attempting suicide

October 22 2010, By Melissa Healy

In the life of a child or adolescent, a parent's sudden death is an event so psychologically devastating, it's hard to imagine it could get any worse. But when that sudden death is self-inflicted, the psychological fallout definitely does mount, possibly compounded by the effects of genes and a parent's behavior in the years leading up to his or her suicide.

And when the suicidal parent was Mom, there's an even greater likelihood a child will go on to make a similar attempt than when Dad was the one to kill himself.

Those are the findings of a study published this week in the journal *Pediatrics*. It follows another study of parental suicide's effect on [children](#) published last spring by many of the same researchers. That study found that children or teens who lost a parent to suicide were three times likelier to later commit suicide themselves than were their peers with living parents.

Each year, between 7,000 and 12,000 children in the United States lose a parent to suicide, according to the authors of the study. These young survivors are resilient, but they often bear deep scars, those who help survivors of suicide acknowledge.

Mental health professionals have had little data to tell them which children might benefit most from interventions aimed at heading off

suicide, a team from Johns Hopkins University and the Karolinska Institute in Sweden wrote. So they set out to determine what patterns of early parental loss were most likely to result in a [suicide attempt](#) or psychiatric hospitalization on the part of the offspring left behind.

To do so, they followed the children of 14,299 Swedish adults who died by suicide and 12,080 who died in sudden [accidents](#) between 1973 and 2003. In all, they tracked 40,325 survivors.

Compared to children whose fathers had died in accidents, those who lost a father to suicide were not more likely to later attempt suicide themselves. But they were more likely to be hospitalized for depression or anxiety than their peers who lost a father in a sudden accident.

The children whose parents had died by suicide were no more nor less likely than those who lost their parents in accidents to be hospitalized for psychosis, personality disorders or drug or alcohol dependence.

The researchers suggest that both genetic influences and parenting behavior among mothers and fathers who committed suicide would put their children at higher risk of some mental illnesses and of self-harming behavior. They surmised that the loss of a primary caregiver certainly contributes to a child's mental distress: the circumstances of that loss might not make a difference, but the magnitude of that loss will be greater when it is mother who dies than when it is father. Finally, the guilt, anger and shame that routinely follows the [suicide](#) of a parent will mark children of suicidal parents for greater psychological fallout than those who [parents](#) died in accidents.

More information: www.afsp.org

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