

New study finds the warning signs of depression in young romance

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Ah, young love between a girl and a boy. So innocent. So much a part of coming of age. Such a romantic backdrop for the warning signs of depression.

Adolescents and [young adults](#) who excessively seek reassurance in their [romantic relationships](#) are at increased risk for [depression](#), according to a new psychological study at the University of Maine. Excessive reassurance seeking — such as constantly asking, “Do you really care about me?” — is associated with poorer relationship quality and internalizing problems, especially for girls and young women, says UMaine Doctoral Research Fellow Jessica Fales.

In her research to better understand the well-documented link between depression and interpersonal rejection, Fales focused on three social processes: excessive reassurance seeking, negative feedback seeking and co-rumination or excessive discussion of personal problems with a tendency to focus on negative topics. She was especially interested in whether [adolescents](#) engage in these behaviors with their dating partners, and if that might help explain why involvement in romantic relationships is itself a risk factor for depression for girls.

Her study is the first to explore the three interpersonal factors simultaneously in the context of adolescent dating.

“Most intriguing was that in romantic relationships, we found that males engage in excessive reassurance seeking just as much as females,” says

Fales, a fifth-year graduate student in the Psychology Department's Clinical Ph.D. Program. "But females experienced more negative outcomes."

Fales studied 110 couples ages 17-26 who had been in an exclusive romantic relationship an average of 12 months. The research showed that both males and females engage in these interpersonal processes with their romantic partners, in most cases more so than they do with their friends. Greater excessive reassurance seeking, co-rumination, and poor romantic relationship quality each uniquely predicted depressive symptoms for young women.

For young men, the need for excessive reassurance, poor romantic relationship quality, and shorter relationship length predicted depressive symptoms.

Follow-up analyses revealed that excessive reassurance seeking impacts depression symptoms directly, over and above any effects of poor relationship quality.

The findings highlight excessive reassurance seeking as an important risk factor for depression in young men and women, Fales says, and suggests that it is not just a symptom of a dysfunctional romantic relationship.

In a separate study, Fales is considering whether individuals who engage in these social processes also have poorer responses to interpersonal conflict. She is investigating the role of the stress hormone cortisol as another potential contributor to relationship instability, lower relationship quality and poorer mental health over time. Cortisol irregularities have previously been associated with clinical depression.

Greater understanding of the social processes in adolescent romantic relationships and their implications for depression has the potential to

improve intervention programs.

“In younger children, it’s normal for them to seek reassurance,” Fales says. “We don’t know where the unhealthy line is, but a starting point is when excessive reassurance seeking starts to annoy other people, to the point that they begin to withdraw from the relationship.”

“These are behaviors and can be changed. They can more readily be targeted through intervention. For example, because we know that dwelling on negative topics or problems with others can lead to depressive symptoms, we can talk to young people about more active problem solving.”

Provided by University of Maine

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