

Depressed classmates appear to be better helpers than young people who are not depressed

October 17 2018



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Depressed classmates appear to be better helpers than young people who are not depressed. Furthermore, a depressed pupil who helps another

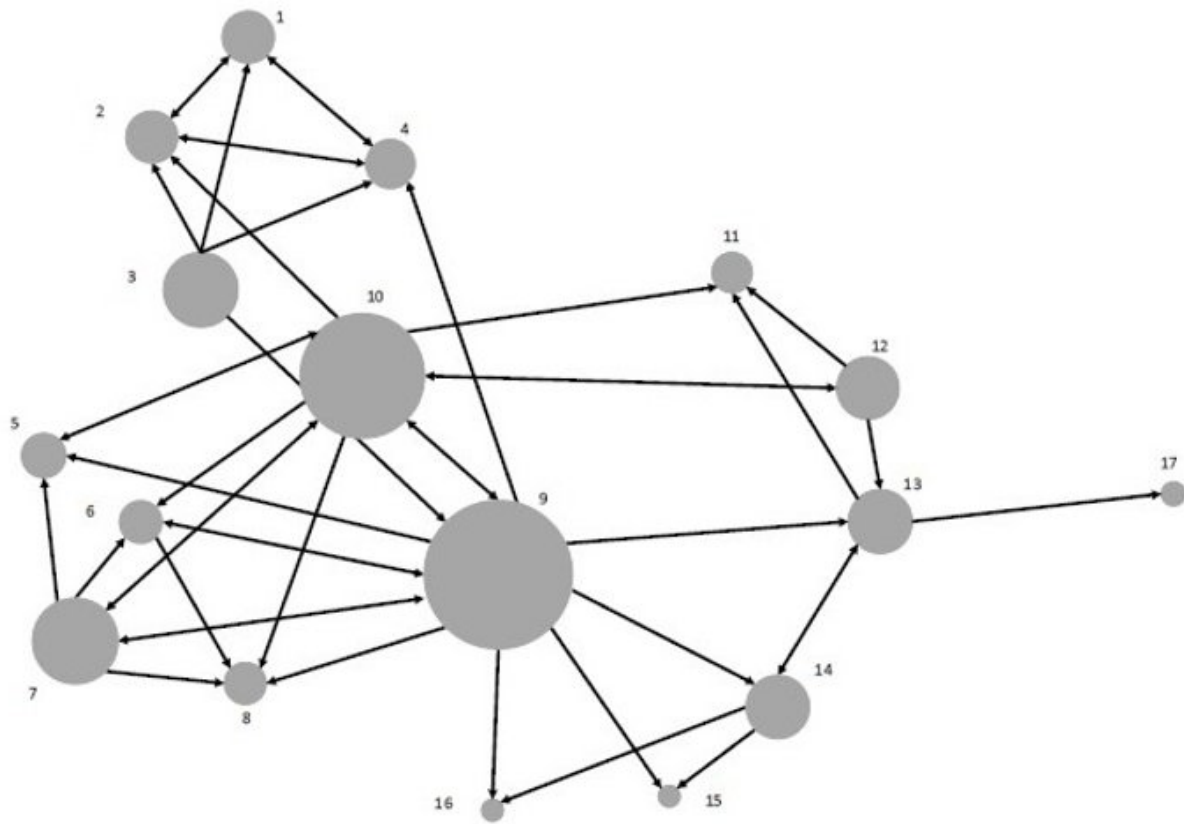
pupil often starts to feel a bit more cheerful. These are findings from the doctoral research of Loes van Rijsewijk (University of Groningen). Van Rijsewijk did her research with a Research Talent grant from NWO and made use of the SNARE data collection funded by NWO.

When [young people](#) start at secondary school, they are faced with many social, biological and cognitive changes. Sociologist Loes van Rijsewijk (University of Groningen) asked ~1000 young people from about 50 classes who helps them with their homework, to repair a bike tire puncture, or when they feel a bit despondent at times.

Van Rijsewijk's research revealed that many young people help each other. Interestingly, both givers and receivers were more popular in the class. Van Rijsewijk: "So not only young people who give help but also those who receive it are socially accepted. That goes against prevailing theories."

In addition, depressed young people were better helpers than young people who were not depressed. Van Rijsewijk: "If depressed pupils help others then the helping relationship is more sustainable and maintained for a longer period of time. This is possibly because depressed young people are better at empathising with the problems of others and can, therefore, provide better help."

According to Van Rijsewijk, providing help also reduces the pupil's symptoms of depression. "Perhaps depressed pupils who provide help learn from their own advice. Or perhaps they feel buoyed up if they discover that their classmates can also feel down."



Researchers asked pupils: ‘Who helps you with problems?’. In this class, pupil 9 stated that she receives help from four fellow pupils. Pupil 17 only receives help from pupil 13 and does not give help to anybody. Credit: Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)

Young people are selective when it comes to whom they ask to help them or whom they give help to. Most young people have two or three like-minded helpers. Girls, for example, more frequently asked for help from other girls and equally depressed young people seek help from fellow sufferers.

Van Rijsewijk advises teachers to discuss the social network of each

class with its pupils. For example, both teachers and pupils can see that pupil number 9 receives help from four pupils, whereas pupil 17 is isolated. According to Rijsewijk, the teacher should deliberately pair pupils: "The [teacher](#) could ask pupil 9 to help pupil 17. That would enable pupil 17 to become more involved in the network via [pupil](#) 9 and so more easily exchange help."

Provided by Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)

Citation: Depressed classmates appear to be better helpers than young people who are not depressed (2018, October 17) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-10-depressed-classmates-helpers-young-people.html>

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