

Teen social networks linked to adult depression

September 30 2020, by Karessa Weir



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Teens who have a larger number of friends may be less likely to suffer from depression later in life, especially women, a new MSU research study has found.

For [female adolescents](#), [popularity](#) can lead to increased depression during the [teen years](#), but can provide lasting benefits of fewer depressive symptoms later in life. Teens who reported fewer friends show higher rates of depression in adulthood, found Molly Copeland, assistant professor of sociology, who co-authored the article "The Long Arm of Social Integration: Gender, Adolescent Social Networks, and Adult Depressive Symptom Trajectories" with lead author Christina Kamis, a sociology doctoral candidate at Duke University. It was published Sept. 14 in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

"Adolescence (is) a sensitive period of early life when structural facets of social relationships can have lasting mental health consequences," wrote Copeland.

Overall, the study found for both men and [women](#), naming few friends predicts higher depressive levels through adolescence into adulthood. But these results are not the same for all genders.

"Compared to boys, girls face additional risks from how others view their social position in adolescence," Copeland wrote.

This current study used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, specifically social network data asking students to select up to five male friends and five female friends.

They were also asked to indicate how often they felt depressed. Results from both men and women "follow a U-shaped trajectory of depressive symptoms across this period of the life course, where depressive symptoms are highest in adolescence, decline into early adulthood, and then climb into one's early 30s." However, women experience a steeper decline in symptoms around 18-26 followed by a greater increase in symptoms in their early 30s.

When combined, the data show that for women, being named as a [friend](#) by peers is associated with increased depression at age 12 but fewer depressive symptoms in adulthood.

"This result suggests that the association between popularity and greater depressive symptoms reverses with age so that women who were more popular in adolescence have fewer depressive symptoms in their mid-20s compared to less popular peers," Copeland wrote.

But men show no association between popularity and depressive symptoms, the study found, only benefits from naming more friends.

Copeland believes this gender difference suggests that gendered expectations and roles that lead to popularity create stress and strain on [adolescent girls](#) that does not apply to boys.

"Gender socialization may lead [adolescent](#) friendships to become more taxing to girls if the higher emotional intimacy in female friendships means that popularity creates higher emotion or psychological burdens for girls," Copeland wrote.

But the stress of popularity may give these girls psychosocial skills that are beneficial later in life when dealing with higher education and new jobs.

"Greater sociality may also contribute to a sense of belonging that is psychologically important in adolescent development, setting youth on pathways of lower depressive symptoms."

Copeland joined MSU's Department of Sociology this fall following the completion of her doctoral degree from Duke University. Her research joins social network analysis and medical sociology to examine how social relationships can benefit or introduce risks to health across the life

course.

More information: Christina Kamis et al. The Long Arm of Social Integration: Gender, Adolescent Social Networks, and Adult Depressive Symptom Trajectories, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (2020).
[DOI: 10.1177/0022146520952769](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146520952769)

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: Teen social networks linked to adult depression (2020, September 30) retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-09-teen-social-networks-linked-adult.html>

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