

# Learning about health from trusted sources may help teens battle depression

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Depression can be a common problem for teens and adolescents, and while many treatments exist, they don't always work for everyone. A new study found that feeling more informed about their health may help

teens take better care of themselves, leading to less depressive symptoms.

The researchers also found that trust played a factor in whether receiving [health information](#) improved [depression](#). The more that adolescents trusted their parents or teacher as a credible source of health information, the more likely they were to experience less depression.

Additionally, even though adolescents reported that they trusted traditional [media](#)—like TV, radio and newspapers—more than online content, only content from social media or websites resulted in actual changes in behavior.

Bu Zhong, associate professor of communications at Penn State, said the findings—recently published in the journal *Child: Care, Health and Development*—suggest that while adolescents are probably taught to be skeptical of online content, websites and social media have the potential to powerfully affect [adolescent](#) health.

"The kids weren't purposefully being misleading when they said they didn't trust information online, even though that information was ultimately linked with lower depression," Zhang said. "They were probably told by their parents and teachers to be wary of information found online or on social media. But our research found that online content has a strong impact on their health behavior and depression mitigation strategies, which are not found in the [traditional media](#) content."

According to the researchers, depression is one of the most common mental disorders among adolescents in China. In the United States, the National Institute of Mental Health reported that 13.3% of the U.S. population aged 12 to 17 in 2017 had at least one major depressive episode.

Additionally, previous work has shown that depression increases the risk of adolescents experiencing poorer school performance and social withdrawal, along with an increased risk of self-harm and suicide ideation.

"This study was actually inspired by my students, after several of them came to me really stressed out," Zhong said. "I know firsthand how widespread depression can be among students, so I was interested in what kind of health information people shared with the young people and if it can help them cope with depression."

The researchers recruited 310 adolescents from elementary, middle and high schools in North China for the study. Participants answered information about health information—such as seminars, classes, pamphlets and other media—they recently consumed, including its quality and whether the source and information were credible.

They also answered questions about their health, including their symptoms of depression and whether consuming health information led to changes in their behavior, such as whether they felt it helped them prevent disease and if it increased their likelihood to discuss and share health information with friends.

The researchers found that the older participants were, the more likely they were to be depressed. Additionally, participants with higher GPAs were also more likely to be depressed. Zhang said this could be because the longer students were in school, and the better their grades were, the more likely they were more likely to feel more pressure to succeed.

However, the more frequently participants used [social media](#), the more likely they were to change their health behaviors, which led to less depression.

Lastly, adolescents felt more depressed when their mothers had a higher level of education, but less depressed when their fathers had a higher level of education. Zhong described this finding as the "tiger mom effect."

"These findings don't mean that a mom's education causes their kids' depression, but one interpretation could be that it may not be a good idea for moms to dominate their children's school life and push them too hard," Zhong said. "Kids may do much better at school and more importantly are less likely to experience stress or other depressive symptoms. Parents may learn from each other in educating their teen children."

Overall, the researchers said the results suggest that health information has the potential to be strategically used to help mitigate depression in teens and adolescents.

"Our research is interested in providing long-term health outcomes, not just temporary relief," Zhong said. "So we're looking for anything in addition to drugs, in addition to therapy, that can help people with their depression, and this offers another possibility. It may not be able to remove all the stressors causing teen depression, but it's possible we could equip adolescents with better [health information](#) gathering skills to help battle depression."

**More information:** Bu Zhong et al, Health information helps mitigate adolescent depression: A multivariate analysis of the links between health information use and depression management, *Child: Care, Health and Development* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/cch.12831](https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12831)

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