

Superhero ideal, authenticity in relationships, and depressive symptoms: A multiple mediation analysis

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After two years of the coronavirus pandemic, young people are struggling more than ever with their mental health and well-being. College students who put a lot of pressure on themselves to be the best at everything they do have been hit especially hard. Psychologist Catherine Steiner-Adair called this type of pressure the "superwoman ideal"; Sally A. Theran, associate professor of psychology at Wellesley College, has modified the term to the gender-neutral "superhero ideal." Theran's recent research has shown that by developing authentic and healthy relationships, young people can fight the depressive symptoms associated with this superhero ideal.

In "Superhero ideal, authenticity in relationships, and depressive symptoms: A multiple mediation analysis," published in the June 2022 issue of *Acta Psychologica*, Theran and co-author Halina Dour, a clinical psychologist and 2008 graduate of Wellesley, explain that internalizing the superhero ideal is directly related to an increase in depressive symptoms.

"No matter how much we try to deemphasize achievement and success to college-age students and encourage them to work on their own intrinsic motivation and well-being, kids are internalizing this message that they feel pressure to achieve," said Theran, who finds in her day-to-day interactions, in addition to her research, that many of her students feel they "have to be superheroes."

One way for students to combat the effects of the superhero ideal is to cultivate authentic relationships with peers, parents, and educators, according to Theran and Dour. They define an authentic relationship as one in which a person feels able to be honest about who they are with someone else. That does not necessarily mean acting the same way around everyone they know—a student will act differently around a teacher than a friend—but rather that in each of those interactions the person feels they are being true to themselves.

To gauge the authenticity of a relationship, Theran said, students can ask themselves, "Does this person make me feel good? Do I feel like I can be myself around this person?"

Theran and her team found that students who had authentic relationships were able to partially mediate the [relationship](#) between the superhero ideal and depressive symptoms. Specifically, the link between superhero ideal and depressive symptoms is in part due to the lack of authenticity in these adolescents' relationships. More internalization of the superhero ideal was associated with less authenticity with parents and peers, and lower levels of authenticity with parents and peers were associated with more depressive symptoms. Thus, authenticity in relationships is part of the mechanism for explaining the significant relation between the superhero ideal and [depressive symptoms](#).

"In college you are more able to have a shift of self," Theran said. "Is this who I am? Is this what I want?" And you may end up having an identity crisis, but that's really healthy, in order to figure out who you are."

Theran sees this in students who have recently started college in particular. They are often trying to figure out what they want to put effort into and care about, rather than just doing what they feel their parents and high school teachers would have wanted. The way out of such a crisis, according to Theran, is for them to find people—peers, teachers, parents—around whom they can be their true selves. Being honest about their achievements, failures, and even confusion is one way to go about building such authentic relationships.

Theran models this skill in her own classroom. She tells her students when she has a paper rejected, for example, or doesn't get a grant for which she had applied. "If you are not robotic with your students, then they will genuinely be themselves, too," said Theran, "and then hopefully

they are less likely to feel such superhero pressure in class and in other areas."

Theran says being aware of both the external and internal pressures on students to achieve is especially important now as adolescents' consumption of social media has increased during the pandemic, and they often unfavorably compare their "worst" selves with someone else's filtered online self. Parents can help their kids understand how to consume social media, Theran said, by pointing out the use of filters and angles, and reminding them that someone is posting one curated minute of their day, not their whole self. "Encourage your teen to consider, how *authentic* are people being in their online presentation? And when people espouse authenticity online, it does not mean that they are actually being their true self," she said. "The very nature of [social media](#) encourages internalization of the superhero ideal while discouraging authenticity, but bolstering authenticity and critical thinking skills can help combat the negative repercussions of the superhero ideal."

Theran has studied authenticity in relationships for 20 years. She co-authored a paper in the *Journal of Aggression Maltreatment & Trauma* in November 2021 with Sohyun C. Han, a 2010 graduate of Wellesley, on the ways authentic and empowered friendships among college women can act as a buffer between childhood emotional and physical abuse and subsequent traumatic symptoms while in college. In August 2021, she published a paper in the *Journal of Genetic Psychology* about the roles of authentic relationships in the prosocial experiences of adolescents. Prosocial experiences are positive aspects of being around peers, such as when another person makes you feel happy, or is nice to you, or provides help when you need it. Theran found that in adolescents with low levels of secure attachments, prosocial experiences increased as their level of [authenticity](#) with peers increased.

"The pandemic really made clear how much relationships mean to us,"

said Theran. "We feel empowered by our friendships. Reaching out and connecting with others can improve our well-being so much."

More information: Sally A. Theran et al, Superhero ideal, authenticity in relationships, and depressive symptoms: A multiple mediation analysis, *Acta Psychologica* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103559](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103559)

Sohyun C. Han et al, Relational Health with Peers as a Buffer between Childhood Maltreatment and Trauma Symptoms among College Women: Brief Report, *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/10926771.2021.2008081](https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2021.2008081)

Sally A. Theran, The Roles of Authenticity in Relationships and Attachment in Adolescents' Prosocial Experiences, *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/00221325.2021.1960790](https://doi.org/10.1080/00221325.2021.1960790)

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