

Can anxiety disorders pass from parent to child?

July 13 2022, By Denise Mann



From the ongoing pandemic and the monkeypox outbreak to the charged

political landscape, New York City mom and entrepreneur Lyss Stern has been increasingly anxious.

Stern worries that she will pass all of this fretting down to her 8-year-old daughter, and a new study suggests she just might.

"Children may be more likely to learn anxious [behavior](#) if it is being displayed by their same-sex parent (i.e., sons learning their fathers' behavior and daughters learning their mothers' behavior)," said study co-author Barbara Pavlova, a [clinical psychologist](#) in the mood disorders program at Nova Scotia Health Authority in Halifax, Canada.

But this isn't inevitable or irreversible, Pavlova said. "The results suggest that children learn anxious behavior from their parents, and this means that transmission of anxiety from parents to children may be preventable."

For the study, Pavlova and her colleagues looked at how anxiety was passed down among parents to same-sex kids among 398 kids from 221 mothers and 237 fathers.

The upshot? Anxious moms are more likely to have anxious daughters, and anxious dads are more likely to have anxious sons. But sharing the house with a same-sex parent who isn't anxious appears to protect children from anxiety. Those kids were 38% less likely to develop an anxiety disorder, the researchers found.

"Because children share approximately the same amount of genetic material with their mothers and fathers, our findings suggest that the role of environmental factors may be especially strong in the transmission of anxiety," Pavlova said.

[Anxiety disorders are very common](#), and they are associated with

depression, educational underachievement, [substance abuse](#) and suicide, the study authors said in background notes.

But they are also treatable, Pavlova said.

"Parents should seek help with their own anxiety not just for their own health, but also for the health of their children," she suggested. "Model courageous behavior to their [children](#) and gently encourage them to face situations that may be anxiety-provoking."

Stern is aiming to do just that. "I want my daughter to be calm and not feed off of my anxious energy, so I have introduced calming routines for both of us—especially before bedtime," she said.

Stern is helping other moms do the same through her latest venture, Moms Time Out, which hosts retreats and events for stressed-out moms.

The new study was published online July 12 in *JAMA Network Open*.

The findings can help [parents](#) like Stern gain greater insight into their own behavior, said Moriah Thomason. She is an associate professor of child and [adolescent psychiatry](#) at NYU Langone Health in New York City.

"Parents can see that there is a relationship between moms and daughters and fathers and sons and anxiety," said Thomason, who was not involved in the study.

When viewed through the lens of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the findings should serve as a wake-up call, Thomason said. The pandemic has increased anxiety levels for many, and kids are spending more time with their families due to lockdowns and quarantine requirements.

"They can learn from you, but it's malleable," she said.

Most people who grapple with anxiety have a list of things that help, whether meditation, therapy, medication or other relaxation methods.

"Be more vocal about the things that have worked for you with kids who are struggling with [anxiety](#)," Thomason suggested.

More information: The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has tips on [recognizing and treating anxiety in kids](#).

Barbara Pavlova et al, Sex-Specific Transmission of Anxiety Disorders From Parents to Offspring, *JAMA Network Open* (2022). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.20919](#)

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