

Co-occurring parental depression symptoms in infancy linked with child emotional difficulties in early adolescence

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New research from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King's College London has found when one parent experiences guilt as a symptom of depression during their child's infancy, it triggers depression symptoms in the other parent and goes on to impact the child's emotional well-being.

The paper, published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, found that when one parent experienced the specific depression symptom, [guilt](#), during their child's infancy, this activated symptoms of depression in the other parent and had a further knock-on effect on child emotional well-being during early adolescence.

Researchers studied 4,492 mother–father–child trios from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), a large group of 14,000 families in England. Parents self-reported their depression symptoms when their child was 21 months old, and mother-reported child emotional difficulties were measured when the child was age 9, 11 and 13.

The findings suggest that specific symptom "cascades" from parent, to parent, to child, are central for co-occurring depression in parents and increased vulnerability in children, providing potential targets for interventions.

Alex Martin, research associate at King's IoPPN and lead author of the study said, "Symptoms of depression can often co-occur in mothers and fathers, and together can have a substantial impact on their child's emotional well-being. However, little is understood about symptom-level mechanisms underlying the co-occurrence of depression symptoms in families."

Martin said, "Our study used [network analysis](#)—a method which identifies clusters of traits and analyses how they influence one

another—to identify specific symptoms that can pass between parents and are associated with later child emotional difficulties. We found that guilt, in particular, appeared to 'cascade' from parent, to parent, to child.

"Becoming a parent is one of the biggest transitions most people will experience. Of course, most people want to be the best parent they can which can create a huge pressure, sometimes manifesting in overwhelming feelings of guilt. Our findings suggest that these feelings may have a long-lasting negative impact on children as they grow up."

When exploring the impact of parental depression symptoms on later child emotional well-being, the researchers found that, for mothers, guilt, anhedonia (the inability to feel pleasure), panic and sadness were highly connected with child emotional difficulties. The authors propose that this may be explained in part by the impact of depression on mothers' parenting and the transmission of depressive thinking styles from mothers to their children.

For fathers, only the symptom of feeling overwhelmed was directly associated with child emotional difficulties. However, guilt and anhedonia in fathers appeared to be indirectly associated with child emotional difficulties when mothers were also experiencing these same symptoms.

By investigating mother and father depression at the symptom level, the researchers identified specific symptoms that may play a role in mutually reinforcing and activating depression symptoms between parents. When experienced by one parent, thoughts about [self-harm](#) also triggered and reinforced [depression symptoms](#) in the other parent but did not go on to impact the child's later emotional well-being.

Professor Ted Barker, Professor in Development and Psychopathology at King's IoPPN and senior author on the study, said, "The [symptom](#) of

feeling guilty seems to play a particularly important role in familial transmission of depression, acting as a reinforcing bridge between parents, and providing a pathway from father to mother to [child](#). Guilt, as well as the other symptoms identified in this study, may therefore provide clinical targets when depression co-occurs between parents. By reducing these influential symptoms, it may reduce the activation of the wider network of [depression](#) between parents."

More information: Alex F. Martin et al, Mother and father depression symptoms and child emotional difficulties: a network model, *The British Journal of Psychiatry* (2023). [DOI: 10.1192/bjp.2023.8](https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2023.8)

Provided by King's College London

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