

Girls' mental health suffers when romances unfold differently than they imagined

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A new study reveals that for adolescent girls, having a romantic relationship play out differently than they imagined it would has negative implications for their mental health.

"I found that girls' risk of severe depression, thoughts of suicide, and suicide attempt increase the more their relationships diverge from what they imagined," said the study's author Brian Soller, an assistant professor of sociology and a senior fellow of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center for Health Policy at the University of New Mexico.

"Conversely, I found no evidence that romantic [relationship](#) inauthenticity—which captures the extent to which relationships unfold in ways that are inconsistent with how adolescents think or feel they should—contributes to poor [mental health](#) among boys."

Titled, "Caught in a Bad Romance: Adolescent Romantic Relationships and Mental Health," the study, which appears in the most recent issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, uses data on more than 5,300 high school students from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and examines the mental health consequences of mismatches between adolescents' ideal and actual relationships.

Soller measured relationship inauthenticity by comparing how adolescents described their ideal relationship in an initial interview with how their first relationship after the interview actually played out.

In the initial interview, researchers provided adolescents with a number of cards describing events that often occur within relationships, including everything from hand holding and kissing to sex, Soller said. Respondents kept cards describing events they would engage in within an ideal relationship, and then indicated the order in which the events would occur. Roughly a year later, the respondents repeated the exercise, only

this time they indicated which events took place within their relationship, and then provided the order in which the events transpired. During both interviews, researchers asked participants about their mental health.

As for why relationship inauthenticity increased the risk of [mental health problems](#) for girls, but not for boys, Soller said, "Romantic relationships are particularly important components of girls' identities and are, therefore, strongly related to how they feel about themselves—good or bad. As a result, relationships that diverge from what girls envision for themselves are especially damaging to their emotional well-being."

On the other hand, Soller said relationships are not as important to boys' identities. "Boys may be more likely to build their identities around sports or other extracurricular activities, so this could be why they are not affected by relationship inauthenticity," he said.

In terms of the study's policy implications, Soller said parents, educators, and policymakers should think about how to help girls construct identities that are less closely tied to romantic involvement. "Helping [girls](#) build their identities around things other than [romantic relationships](#) may mitigate the effects of relationship inauthenticity on their mental health," he said.

Soller also suggested that creating programs and interventions aimed at providing adolescents with tools to help them better control how the events in their relationships play out may lead to romances that enhance adolescent mental health and other developmental outcomes.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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