

Midlife depression may stem from tension with mothers and siblings, study finds

20 September 2017



New research by Megan Gilligan shows family tension can affect our well-being in midlife. Credit: Iowa State University College of Human Sciences

Relationships with our mothers and siblings change as we become adults and start our own families, but the quality of those relationships still has an effect on our well-being, particularly at midlife.

A new study led by Iowa State University researcher Megan Gilligan found that tension with our mothers and siblings, similar to our spouses, is associated with symptoms of depression. The research, published in the journal *Social Sciences*, found all three relationships have a similar effect and one is not stronger than another.

"Family scholars have focused a lot on the relationship we have with our spouse," said Gilligan, an assistant professor of human development and [family](#) studies. "There is this assumption that as you go through your life course, you leave these other relationships with your parents and siblings behind, but you don't. You carry those with you."

The relationship between mothers and daughters is even more significant. The research shows tension between mothers and [adult children](#) was a stronger predictor of depression for daughters than it was for sons. However, gender did not make a difference in relationships with spouses and siblings. Gilligan says this makes sense based on her previous research.

"We know that mothers and daughters in adulthood have the closest relationships and also the most conflictual. These are really intense relationships," she said. "Later in life, adult children start providing more care to their parents, and daughters in particular are often caregivers for their mothers."

Midlife is key to findings

Midlife is often characterized as stable and uneventful, but in reality, it is a time of change and transition for many people, Gilligan said. For example, adult children may be leaving the house and aging parents start requiring more care. Additionally, researchers know that midlife adults often react more strongly to family conflict than older [adults](#) do.

While there is a great deal of research on young families and family dynamics later in life, there is a gap at midlife, Gilligan said. Given the potential for greater conflict with mothers or siblings related to these midlife changes, it is important to understand the consequences of negative relationships on our psychological well-being.

"Midlife is a time when siblings are often coming back together as they prepare and navigate care for parents," she said. "For that reason, it's a pivotal time when these [family relationships](#) might be experiencing more tension, more strain, more discord."

Professionals should consider whole family

The research team used data collected through the Within-Family Differences Study. Their analysis included 495 adult children within 254 families. For a majority of families, multiple siblings participated in the study. Researchers measured [depressive symptoms](#) and tension among family members through survey questions. They controlled for race, gender and education.

In the paper, Gilligan and her colleagues explained that they expected all three relationships would predict depressive symptoms, but the effect would vary depending on the salience of the [relationship](#). The fact that they found no significant difference between spouses, [mothers](#) and siblings is important to note, especially for practitioners. Gilligan says instead of focusing solely on a [romantic partner](#) or spouse, marriage and family therapists should ask about other sources of family stress.

"These findings show that we are navigating other family relationships at the same time and we're not experiencing them in isolation; we're experiencing them simultaneously," Gilligan said. "The stress people are experiencing may be the result of a romantic partner or spouse. However, it could also be that they're fighting with their siblings or they're experiencing a lot of tension with their mother even though they are 50 years old."

Provided by Iowa State University

APA citation: Midlife depression may stem from tension with mothers and siblings, study finds (2017, September 20) retrieved 15 June 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-midlife-depression-stem-tension-mothers.html>

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