Strong family ties during teen years can help ward off depression in later life

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Teens who feel supported by their parents during depressive episodes fare better for many years. Credit: Lightfield Studios/Shutterstock.com

Depression is a leading cause of disability and disease for people around the world. It often begins during adolescence, especially for females, may continue or recur in adulthood and tends to become a lifetime chronic health condition. More than 300 million people suffer from this mental health disorder worldwide. Depression is not only about feeling blue. It can also harm one’s social relationships, school or work and physical health. Poor mental health and depressive symptoms may also be associated with the recent increase in midlife pre … re deaths of despair due to suicide, alcohol and drugs.

Although treatment methods and intervention efforts continue to advance, many depressive conditions remain irreversible. The push for prevention and early, affordable and feasible intervention is stronger than ever, especially for young people.

We are both social demographers who study family processes and health. We use a life course perspective in our research, meaning that we use longitudinal data to follow individuals as they move through various stages of life and examine how the social contexts they experience influence their health.

Recently we were interested in understanding how mental health changes from adolescence through mid adulthood. We wanted to see if we could identify family processes that might protect teens from depression in adolescence and later. We found that close and cohesive family relationships, understanding, and shared good times protected them then and later.

Prevention a worthy goal

It is well known from the scientific evidence that close family relationships reduce the risks of depression during adolescence, a life stage when depression often begins, especially for girls. We were interested to know whether the mental health benefits of close and cohesive family relations in adolescence last into young adulthood, and so we used longitudinal data from a nationally-representative sample to address this question.

The family context is a key area that draws wide scholarly and public attention for early intervention efforts. Most research on the role of the family context for depression focuses on risk factors, such as neglect, abuse and financial insecurity. We wondered, however, whether preventive efforts may be more effective if focused on protective factors. We could not find major studies that could shed enough light on the topic.

Some small cross-sectional studies with clinical and community samples suggest that being part of a close and cohesive family in adolescence helps alleviate depression symptoms for teenagers.
adulthood when adolescents move out of their
parent's house and embark on their independent
lives? This intriguing and pressing question
remains unknown due to a dearth of longitudinal
studies that follow the same people over time.

A study, which we published on Oct. 7 in JAMA
Pediatrics is, so far as we know, the first to
examine this topic in a nationally representative
sample by tracking individuals over a 30-year life
course from early adolescence to midlife. Our
findings suggested that, yes, the protective effect
not only helps in the tough teen years but also
protects later.

Some good news, and good insights

The data we used come from the National
Longitudinal Study of ... cent to Adult Health, a
nationally-representative study that has followed
over 20,000 adolescents starting in 1995 into
adulthood. The group of adolescents who started in
the cohort have been re-interviewed five times,
adding valuable knowledge about development
over the course of life. The new data from the 2017
round of interviews have enabled us to examine
how what happens in adolescence matters for later
life mental health.

Our findings provide a new contribution to the
research on early family experiences and lifetime
depression and insights into how depression can
be prevented from developing into a lifetime illness.

First, we found gender differences in depression
over time. Females experienced significantly higher
levels of depressive symptoms than males between
early adolescence and their early 40s.

The overall trajectory of depressive symptoms was
high in adolescence, fell in the early 20s, and then
slowly rose again in the late 30s. The growth curve
of depression is flatter for men than women.

Teenage girls are vulnerable to high levels of
depression during middle to late adolescence. Teen
boys, in comparison, experienced a shorter period
of depression in late adolescence. Women then
experienced the highest levels of depression in
their late 30s. Men's highest levels of depression
occurred in their mid-30s to early 40s in the face of
increasing challenges from work, family and social
life.

Our primary interest, however, was to examine
whether cohesive family relationships in
adolescence protect young people from depression
in adulthood and how long those protections last.

Our findings indicate the mental health benefits of
cohesive family relationships during adolescence
last through midlife. Individuals who experienced
positive adolescent family relationships had
significantly lower levels of depressive symptoms
from early adolescence to midlife (late 30s to early
40s) than did those who experienced less-positive
family relationships.

We also see this benefit working differently for men
and women. Women benefit more from positive
adolescent family relationships than men,
especially in adolescence and the early 20s. But
men with low parent-child conflict benefit for a
longer time throughout young adulthood than
women.

Living in a cohesive home, having someone around
who understands and pays attention, and having
fun together as a family can build up warmth, trust
and attachment between the family members and
adolescents and positive feelings for teens. The
absence of parent-child conflict reinforces parental
support and approval for them. Close relations may
provide sources of social and emotional support
that encourages the development of skills for
coping with changing and cumulative stressors.

Our research findings emphasize the urgent need
for early preventive interventions of depression in
adolescent family life. Adolescence is a critical life
stage where profound transformations in
neurological, biological, cognitive and social
development take place. These profound changes
during adolescence make teens especially
vulnerable to the development of lifetime
depression.

Public health initiatives can teach and encourage
parents and family members to nurture positive
family relationships with their adolescents.
Programs can be developed to promote family cohesiveness for adolescents by providing tips on how families can show affection and understanding, spend time together and work through conflict. This preventive approach will be most effective in fostering long-term healthy mental development into adulthood.

Our study, however, does not imply that adolescents in less cohesive families are doomed to lifetime depression. Depression is an extremely complex mental disorder. No one knows exactly what causes it. Factors such as genetics, abuse or serious illnesses can increase risks of depression too. Teens may be able to find similar sources of social support and gain coping skills through other social connections with friends, in religious and other institutions, and in the local community.

The skills and strategies that youth learn to cope with emotional problems may last throughout life, continue to promote mental health well into adulthood, and help to prevent negative outcomes and premature deaths due to suicide, alcohol or drugs in middle age.

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