

Depression May Be Lifelong Parent Trap

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Parenthood is wonderful, joyful, rewarding and depressing. A study by Florida State University professor Robin Simon and Vanderbilt University's Ranae Evenson found that parents have significantly higher levels of depression than adults who do not have children. Even more surprising, the symptoms of depression do not go away when the kids grow up and move out of the house.

Empty nest parents, as Simon and Evenson call them, are no less depressed than non-parents. The researchers, who analyzed data from the National Survey of Families and Households, theorize that parents are still involved in their adult children's lives and continue to be concerned about them. That has an emotional cost.

"Parents have more to worry about than other people do - that's the bottom line," Simon said. "And that worry does not diminish over time. Parents worry about their kids' emotional, social, physical and economic well-being. We worry about how they're getting along in the world."

One of the most interesting findings of the study, which was published in the American Sociological Association's Journal of Health and Social Behavior, is that there is no type of parent that reports less depression than non-parents, Simon said. That is significant because other major adult roles in the United States, such as being married and employed, are associated with enhanced emotional well-being.

They also found that certain types of parents have higher levels of depression than other parents. Parents of adult children, whether they

live at home or not, and parents who do not have custody of their minor children have more symptoms of depression.

This means that parents living with their minor children, whether they are biological, adopted or stepchildren, have the least symptoms of depression - a finding that contradicts the assumption that these parents have the most distress.

"Young children in some ways are emotionally easier," Simon said. "Little kids, little problems. Big kids, big problems."

Parents who are married also have fewer symptoms of depression than those who are unmarried, a finding that surprised neither researcher. But they were surprised - shocked, actually - to find that the effects of parenthood on depression were the same for men and women. These findings are inconsistent with some earlier studies and with the assumption that parenthood is more consequential for the emotional well-being of women, Simon said.

The findings do not mean that parents don't find any pleasure in their roles; it's just that the emotional costs can outweigh the psychological benefits. That's because, as the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child, but in the United States, parents don't necessarily have community support or help from extended family.

"It's how we do parenting in this society," Simon said. "We do it in a very isolated way and the onus is on us as individuals to get it right. Our successes are our own, but so are our failures. It's emotionally draining."

The value of a study like this is that it presents a realistic view of the difficulties associated with parenthood and encourages parents to seek greater social support, Simon said.

"Parents should know they are not alone; other people are feeling this way, too," she said. "This is a really difficult role, but we romanticize it in American culture. Parenthood is not the way it is in TV commercials."

Source: Florida State University

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