

Study Finds Depression Intensifies from One Generation to Next

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As the medical community continues to more accurately diagnose depression and anxiety disorders, a new study sheds light on how these debilitating phenomena are passed down through the generations -- and may even intensify.

Nearly 60 percent of children whose parents and grandparents suffered from depression have a psychiatric disorder before they reach their early teens, according to a new study by researchers at Columbia University Medical Center (CUMC) and the New York State Psychiatric Institute (NYSPI). This incidence is more than double the number of children (approximately 28 percent) who develop such disorders with no family history of depression.

The study, published in the January issue of *Archives of General Psychiatry*, is the first to follow three generations of high-risk families and has taken more than two decades to complete. The CUMC/NYSPI research team began studying 47 first-generation family members in 1982 and then interviewed 86 of their children several times as they grew into adulthood. The team also collected data from 161 members of the third generation, whose average age is 12.

Results found that most of the prepubescent grandchildren with a two-generation history of depression developed anxiety disorders that developed into depression as they reached adolescence. This trend was also found in the children's parents, who were followed through adolescence and adulthood.

"We have shown that the risk of depression is carried through several generations and that it intensifies as more generations are affected," said lead author Myrna Weissman, professor of psychiatry and epidemiology at CUMC and chief of the Department of Clinical & Genetic Epidemiology at NYSPI." Other investigators involved included Priya Wickramaratne and Virginia Warner.

Previous studies have shown that children of a depressed parent are at greater risk for development of mood and anxiety disorders, but the Columbia study is the first to illustrate how the risk intensifies across three generations.

"Children of parents and grandparents with depression are at extremely high risk for mood and anxiety disorders even when they're very young," Weissman said. "They should be considered for treatment if they develop anxiety disorders, or at least monitored very closely."

Source: Columbia University (By Craig LeMoult)

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