Depression Colors Way Girls Interpret Events

BY SHERRY BOSCHERT
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SAN FRANCISCO — Depressed girls reported more negative life events in the past year compared with nondepressed girls, and the depressed girls felt greater effects from bad events, a study of 166 girls found.

The findings support cognitive models of depression that describe a person’s dysfunctional thinking and attitudes leading to depression, and the depression biasing the person’s interpretation of experiences, Nicole Moody and her associates reported in a poster presentation at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association.

Moody is a graduate student in educational psychology at the University of Texas, Austin.

As part of an ongoing study of depression in central Texas, girls aged 9-14 years completed the Life Events Checklist, a self-report measure that assesses major life events during the past 12 months.

The measure lists events related to family health, family member changes, family moves, money, crises, unexpected news, parent's marital relationship, parent-child relationship, school, and family resources.

The girls were asked to check any of the listed events that happened to them and to indicate whether the event was “good” or “bad” and to rate how much of an effect it had on their lives.

Doctoral students in the school of psychiatry then administered the Kiddie Schedule for Affective Disorders and Schizophrenia for School-Age Children—a semistructured clinical interview.

Using results of this measure plus child and parent reports of depressive symptoms in the girls, 118 girls were diagnosed as depressed. The 48 nondepressed girls served as the control group.

Girls in the depressed group reported a mean of 6.3 negative events during the past year, compared with a mean of 4.6 negative events for girls in the control group. The difference was statistically significant.

The depressed girls also reported that the negative events had a significantly greater effect on them, compared with the nondepressed girls.

The results support the literature suggesting that negative life events play a role in activating a depressive episode and that depression colors the way a person interprets life events, Ms. Moody said. “Are the depressed girls actually experiencing more negative life events, or is their depression distorting the way in which they interpret life events and their effects?”

The role that negative life events play in depression is still up for debate, she added.

The study cohort was 42% white, 32% Hispanic, 12% black, 5% multiracial, 3% Asian, and 7% unspecified race (numbers do not add up to 100% because of rounding).

An estimated 60%-70% of depressed individuals have experienced at least one stressful life event before the onset of depression, the literature suggests. Depressed people report up to six times as many negative life events compared with nondepressed individuals, other reports indicate.

The aim of cognitive-behavioral therapy is to guide patients toward more realistic evaluation of experiences and to modify their thinking to produce an improvement in mood and behavior, Ms. Moody noted. Better understanding of factors contributing to the onset and maintenance of depression will better inform the treatment of early adolescents with depression.

Both MDD groups had significantly higher scores on aggression and self-injurious behaviors than did non-MDD groups. The MDD/DIS and DIS/no MDD groups had significantly higher scores on oral aggression than did the other two groups. The MDD/DIS group also had a significantly longer tantrum recovery time and displayed significantly more tantrums in the home than did the other groups. The MDD/no DIS group and MDD/DIS groups had significantly more tantrums in school.

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