

Girls who dish to their friends about their problems may actually be increasing their misery by doing so. (07/16/07 -- NEW YORK) - ABC News

Such are the findings of a study released Sunday, in which researchers at the University of Missouri-Columbia found that "co-rumination" -- in other words, excessively discussing problems with close friends -- appears to increase anxiety and depression in young and adolescent girls. Boys of the same age, on the other hand, appeared to be immune to these effects.

The study appears in the July issue of the American Psychological Association (APA) journal *Developmental Psychology*. "We used to really worry about kids who don't have friends," said lead study author Amanda Rose, associate professor of psychology at the University of Missouri-Columbia. "That makes sense; we still should worry about them. But we usually feel good about kids who have friends whom they can talk to.

"It is important that parents and professionals not ignore the possibility that girls with close friends are still at risk for depression and anxiety." Psychology experts grappled over exactly how the findings should be interpreted. Alan Kazdin, professor of child psychiatry at Yale University and former president of the APA, said the findings point to certain warning signs for parents. "A little bit of talking about problems is fine, but much focus on trauma, injury and problems can incubate -- increase or exacerbate -- their effect," he said. "Sensitizing parents to this and having professionals sensitize parents and teachers to this would be helpful."

Some, however, questioned the link.

"It should be noted that this shows a co-occurrence of two behaviors... and not a causal relationship," said Dr. Chris Okiishi, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. "In other words, this study does not show that one causes the other -- just that they occurred at the same time." And Nadine Kaslow, chief psychologist at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta and a professor at Emory University's School of Medicine, said there are benefits to communicating concerns with friends that go beyond depression and anxiety.

"Just because it makes us feel depressed, it isn't all bad," she said. "We wouldn't keep doing it if it just made us feel bad." She added that it is important to note that while such interactions may increase certain symptoms of anxiety or depression, it does not necessarily mean that a girl is clinically anxious or depressed. "We need to be really careful, because while you might have symptoms of anxiety and depression, that does not necessarily mean you have the condition," she said.

A Vicious Cycle

Rose and her colleagues looked at both boys and girls in 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 9th grades over a six-month period to see how sharing problems with friends correlated with anxious and depressed feelings. What they found was that for girls, sharing problems with friends strengthened their friendships - but it also increased their feelings of depression and anxiety.

"What is interesting is that co-rumination is not only linked with anxiety and depression, but it is also linked with friends feeling close to one another," Rose said.

The same trend was not seen in boys, in whom sharing problems increased feelings of friendship but had no impact on their depression or anxiety levels. Yale's Kazdin said the findings of the study seem to back up behavior differences seen between girls and boys.

"There is a body of research around this that adds to its credibility," he said. "For example, girls tend to make more internalizing statements -- blame themselves a little more for things that happen -- in contrast to boys who tend to make more externalizing statements, [in other words] blame outside causes."

"It has long been known that girls are more prone to anxiety and depression during adolescence than boys," agreed Jonathan Sandoval, professor of education at the University of the Pacific's School of Education in Stockton, CA. "This is a time when societal pressures and expectations impact young women negatively, and talking about their concerns with others is obviously better than keeping them to themselves."

But what might be the effect of co-rumination induced depression and anxiety? Some worried that such feelings might in turn spur even more co-rumination, leading adolescents into a vicious cycle of despair. "The danger is when the discussion between these girls is negative and destructive and is lacking the discussion of effective coping," said Cynthia Thomas, crisis response chair of the Arizona School Counselors Association. And some kids may be especially prone to this pattern.

"Anxious, depressed kids complain a lot in a way that is not effective in eliciting support, so that their complaints 'don't work,' leading to more demoralization," said Dr. John T. Walkup, associate professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Hospital. The exception to this rule is discussion designed to eventually lead to a solution to the problem at hand, which generally has the effect of sparing young worriers from undue anxiety and depression.

"I think what it brings to mind is the distinction between controllable stressors and uncontrollable stressors," study author Rose said. There are certain things that kids can solve by ruminating over them, she said -- such as how to improve a C in math, or how to develop soccer skills good enough to make the team. But for other problems, such as relationship issues and other fixtures of adolescent life, the solutions are not as apparent.

"Girls tend to co-ruminate about stressors that they can't control," she said. "I think helping girls recognize the differences between what they can solve and can't solve is important." How Parents Can Help Keeping the importance of a solution in mind could go a long way in staving off additional anxiety and depression.

"Parents do well to listen to their children and help them seek solutions -- and to encourage them to see all aspects of a situation, not just the negative," Okiishi of the University of Iowa said.

Johns Hopkins' Walkup added that parents and medical professionals would do well to be on the lookout for the traditional warning signs of depression and anxiety, rather than focusing on co-rumination.

"Ineffective complaining is sign of depression and anxiety rather than a major cause," he said. "Over time, ineffective complaining can add to the burden of depression as people fell more helpless and less well understood."

Meanwhile, parents of adolescents might do well to try to shake off their own anxiety when it comes to protecting their children from a mental health crisis. "The most important thing is not to get too bent out of shape about your daughter being involved in one of these relationships, unless her ability to function in one way or another -- her grades, her sleeping patterns -- starts to deteriorate," said Dr. Redford Williams, director of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at Duke University School of Medicine. Emory's Kaslow agreed. "If it's a little anxiety, a little sadness, that's just part of normal life. It's part of growing up."