



SPR 18th Annual Meeting

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ID# 64

Location: Mt. Elbert (Atrium Tower/2nd Floor)

Time of Presentation: Jun 02 1:15 PM - 2:45 PM

Category/Theme: Effectiveness Trials

Effects on Youth Mental Health of a Program Targeting Parental Depression: Testing gene-environment interactions in a randomized experiment

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A key risk factor for youth mental health is parents' depression (Beardslee, Versage, & Gladstone, 1998). In fact, poor family environments are one of the most consistent risk factors in the onset and maintenance of mood disorders among youth (Evans & Seligman, 2005; Beardslee, Wright, Gladstone, & Forbes, 2007). Yet, few studies have examined the effects on youth of intervention-generated improvements in parents' depression in the context of poverty, and fewer still have examined how genetic variations may moderate these effects. This study addresses how improvements in parents' depression, resulting from an intervention, affect adolescents' mental health, and how these effects may be moderated by the natural variation in the promoter region of the 5-HTT (serotonin transporter) gene.

This study is part of the Working Toward Wellness Project of the Hard-to-Employ Demonstration and Evaluation Project, conceived by DHHS and conducted by MDRC. The intervention includes telephone outreach by a MA-level, clinically-trained care manager to facilitate engagement in treatment and monitor the quality and continuity of care. Medicaid-recipient parents were screened for depression, and 500 parents were randomly assigned to this intervention or to a usual care control group. Data collected at 18 month follow-up focus on 222 adolescents who were 8-14 at random assignment, during a key period of the development of mental health disorders. Surveys conducted with adolescents include assessments of their mood (The Mood and Feelings Questionnaire), anxiety (Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale), loneliness (Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Scale), and depression (Children's Depressive Inventory). From both parents and children, saliva samples over two days were collected to assess the diurnal pattern of salivary cortisol, and additional samples were collected from parents and children to assess short/long polymorphism in the 5-HTT gene. All data has been collected and is ready for analysis.

At the six month follow-up, the intervention was found to be effective in increasing mental health treatment utilization. A few effects on parents' depression were observed (particularly reductions in severe depression). Strong effects were not observed for all parents, but moderating effects by genetic characteristics were not examined. Analyses will assess the treatment-control differences at 18 months for adolescents with particular attention to the moderating effects by the 5HTT gene.

Diathesis-stress theories predict that individuals' response to stress is the result of a gene-environment interaction. This study provides a strong test of these theories by testing them in the context of an experimental design.

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