

The Connection Between Close Relationships and Depression

Jin Wu

Department of Science, McMaster University, Hamilton, L8S 4L8, Canada

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Abstract: Depression, or major depressive disorder (MDD) is one of the most pervasive mental health disorders that has affected millions of individuals globally. In this field of study, researchers have examined many factors that could affect and help with the disorder. In this review, the intricate connection between close relationships and depression is discussed. By exploring how the quality of intimate relationships including romantic partnerships, family relationships, and close friendships influence the depressive symptoms, several conclusions have been made. Supportive and high-quality relationships could serve as protective factors that reduced the risk and severity of depression as well as provided emotional resilience. On the other hand, conflict, abuse or insecure attachment styles could increase the vulnerability to depressive symptoms. This bidirectional influence was addressed, acknowledging that depression could also strain close relationships. The implication for supportive therapy and interventions such as Emotional Focused Therapy (EFT) and Family Based Therapy (FBT) were also discussed.

1 INTRODUCTION

Recently, depression has become one of the biggest and most pervasive mental health disorders worldwide. Individuals from various age groups and cultural backgrounds were affected and 6% of the population globally meets the major depressive disorder criteria at a specific time point (Penninx et al., 2013). As depression became prevalent, much research has been conducted in studying this field. Depression could be characterized by loss of interest and enjoyment in life, irregular sleep patterns, persistent feelings of sadness and associated cognitive, behavioural, and emotional symptoms (Penninx et al., 2013). The importance of studying depression was unadopted as it may rise to a first place ranking global disease burden (Mathers & Loncar, 2006). Due to the major symptoms of depression, which has a great impact on functioning and quality of life and higher chance in getting other diseases in the life period, depression largely affects public health (Penninx et al., 2013). Because of the complex and multifaceted nature of depression, researchers still have a long journey on understanding the environmental, psychological, and social factors that contribute to its onset and progression. Based on these factors, close relationships including romantic, familial, and close friendships draw attention to the potential influences on mental health outcomes.

Previous research has shown that the increase of major depressive disorder is related to insecure family, friendship, and romantic partner relationships (Goodman et al., 2019). Close relationships are necessary to human well-being, it offers emotional support, companionship, and a sense of belonging while the partner can provide help, support goal striving, and celebrate the accomplishments together (Clark & Grote, 2012). Positive relationships help against the life challenges and stressors, which make one's life brighter and happier. However, a negative relationship such as insecure or conflict will exacerbate one's feelings of loneliness and hopelessness.

By exploring the connection between depression and close relationships, this review can provide critical insights into how positive relationships promote mental well-being and why negative relationships can be harmful. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing comprehensive approaches to mental health and imply the role of close relationships in supporting interventions and therapies.

This study will review articles that relate to how the quality of romantic partnerships, family relationships, and close friendships influence the depressive symptoms, and discuss the possible factors in the close relationships that affect the depression.

2 METHOD

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using the database Google Scholar. Following search terms and their derivatives were used: close relationship, mental disorder, depression, major depressive disorder, romantic relationship, close friendship, family, and depression symptom. Studies were included in accordance with the following criteria: (i) has evidence-based conclusion in how depression affects the close relationships, (ii) contain empirical data, (iii) contain analysis related to the connection between two objects. Each study would be read and reviewed fully and the conclusion about the connection between depression and close relationship would be made after the review. A total of 25 articles were reviewed.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Influence of Romantic Partnerships on Depression

The quality of romantic relationships has significant impacts on depression, it serves as both a risk and protective factor. Positive romantic relationships such as individuals having a secure attachment style tend to have a positive perception of themselves and their partner, allowing them to build supportive and trusting relationships. Those kinds of individuals are more likely to seek emotional support when they face stressful events and benefit from stable relationships. Securely attached individuals often report lower levels of depressive symptoms since their relationships give them a reliable backup of comfort and resilience (Beatson & Taryan, 2003).

Conversely, the negative relationships or insecure relationships increase the vulnerability to depression. Insecure relationships can be formed by individuals who have insecure attachment styles such as avoidant attachment style and anxious attachment style. Avoidant attachment style can reflect how individuals are comfortable with closeness and emotional intimacy in a relationship. Highly avoidant peoples have positive but brittle self-views, they see their romantic partners negatively and they do not give hope to the relationships (Simpson et al., 1996). Avoidant people believe that they cannot get emotional support or proximity from their partner, so they maintain high independence and control in their relationships. They usually behave negatively when coping with situations as well as communicating with

partners. Individuals with anxious attachment styles often think negatively of themselves, worry about being abandoned by their partners, as well as heavily seek emotional support from their partners (Simpson et al., 1996). This worrying behaviour always pulls their partners away and worsen their mental health. Those insecure attachments predict higher levels of anxiety symptoms in depression and anxious attachment styles are more associated with higher depressive symptoms (Yi et al., 2012). One longitudinal study conducted within 1706 adolescents also proved that. The participants were tested three times in total with a one-year interval between each measurement (Verhees et al., 2021). The result indicated that both anxiety and avoidant attachment style could affect the depressive symptoms (Verhees et al., 2021). Another research indicated that individuals high on attachment anxiety and/or avoidance tend to have higher rates of depressive symptoms than those with low levels of attachment anxiety and/or avoidance (McGuire et al., 2018).

Other than the attachment style, the relationship status could also affect depression. One meta-analysis investigated the association between adolescent romantic relationship quality, breakups and mental health outcomes. The results showed that higher relationship quality was associated with better mental health outcomes, and the breakups were linked to increased depression (Mirsu-Paun & Oliver, 2017). The conflict and intimacy in romantic relationships are other factors that could affect depression. These factors directly related to the quality of romantic relationships and their association between depression was supported by one new research. The research examined how intimacy and conflict in romantic relationships among emerging adults predicted depressive symptoms and got the results that both intimacy and conflict were directly related to depressive symptoms (Graziano et al., 2024).

3.2 Family Relationships and Depression

Family relationships are one of the most significant factors in one's life that shape developments from early childhood to adulthood. Family acts as a primary source of emotional support and stress management which have profound effects on mental health. The childhood experiences play a strong role in shaping one's emotional development, painful childhood such as abusing experiences or ignoring by the parents affect one's feeling of worthiness and associate with long-term mental health challenges. For example, early interactions with caregivers

significantly shape attachment styles, the attachment styles formed can influence emotional regulation and coping mechanisms. Secure attachment increases resilience and reduces vulnerability to depression, and insecure or disorganized attachment styles increase the risk of getting depression. In an individual's life, a supportive and less conflictual family relationship can be protective to individuals' mental states and maintain stability under challenging situations (Mason et al., 2009). A study published in 2019 indicated that positive family relationships during adolescence are associated with better mental health outcomes, they had less chance to get depression, and it extended into adulthood (Chen & Harris, 2019). For the adolescent study, another research has been done in China and suggested that a relaxed and happy family atmosphere, higher emotional differentiation among family members, and less parental control are associated with lower likelihood of depression in adolescents (Shi et al., 2023). Another analysis has shown that individuals with a stable and positive family environment were low in depression symptoms and high in self-concept (Lau & Kwok, 2000). The study was done with 2706 adolescents in Hong Kong and the stable and positive family environment could be described as cohesive, orderly, and achieving family environment in the study (Lau & Kwok, 2000). There were lots of studies that tested on adolescents, but for adults, are there any family relationship's effect on depression? The answer is yes. One research analysed the relationship between depression and family arguments among older adults, the results showed that more family arguments predicted harsher depressive symptoms in both men and women (Wong et al., 2020). Other than this result, the research also found that depression can lead to increased family conflicts and worsen the depressive symptoms, also creating a reciprocal relationship between depression and family conflicts (Wong et al., 2020).

3.3 Social Isolation and Depression

Social isolation is a significant and well-documented risk factor for depression, lack of meaningful social connections with others can lead to emotional distress and psychological challenges. Although social isolation can be a risk factor in depression, there was no evidence that indicates a significant relationship between social isolation and its impact on depressive symptoms when an individual already has depression (Santini et al., 2015). One possible reason could be that individuals who have depression have already isolated themselves from society and they might be

used to it, so when the researchers did the experiment, there was no significant impact on the depressive symptoms.

3.4 Bidirectional Influence: Depression's Impact on Relationships

The relationship between depression and close relationships is bidirectional, which both affect each other in a reciprocal way. While the quality of close relationships significantly affects the progression of depressive symptoms, depression can also alter the nature of these relationships. Understanding this bidirectional connection is essential for addressing the relationship between depression and close relationships. In the aspect of romantic relationships, a securely attached individual with partners who have depression would result in an insecure romantic relationship (Sharabi et al., 2016). Another study has indicated that lower levels of depression and anxiety could form a better quality of romantic relationship (Leach et al., 2013). Depression also connected to the atmosphere in the family. One research has shown that depressive parents had higher chance in child abuse which would affect the mental states of the child and affect their future life (Burke et al., 2003). In the research done by Wong et al mentioned above, its result indicated that depression affects the family relationships and created a negative reciprocal cycle (Wong et al., 2020). In the context of social interaction and depressive symptoms, Elmer and Stadtfeld held a study in 2018 among undergraduate students and found out that individuals with depressive symptoms engaged in fewer social interactions, they often stayed with others who have similar symptoms. This study suggested that depression could lead to social withdrawal, and social isolation may worsen depressive symptoms, which created a cyclical effect (Elmer & Stadtfeld, 2018).

4 DISCUSSION

These findings highlight the connections between depression and close relationships in romantic partnerships, family relationships and social friendships, which emphasizes the importance of how relationships can interact with depression. To further use these findings to help depressed individuals, psychologists should use more strategies such as Emotional Focused Therapy (EFT) and Family Based Therapy (FBT) when they treat patients with

depression. These therapies could specifically address relational dynamics and aim to improve the quality of close relationships as well as decrease the symptoms of depression. The EFT focuses more on creating secure attachment bonds within romantic relationships. The FBT targets more on family relationships which could help to make a supportive home environment for individuals with depression. Society and community can also play a role in helping the patients. For example, the community could provide opportunities to individuals to build meaningful social connections and give them emotional support when they feel bad. Those supporting programs could help individuals with depression to decrease symptoms and reduce pain. Future research could focus on longitudinal studies that examine the long-term impact of close relationships on depression and vice versa. Also, the investigation of how cultural and societal factors affect the relationship between depression and close relationships could provide valuable insights.

This study does have several limitations. It is not targeting one specific group which may affect the accuracy of different ethical or age groups. For example, adolescents with depression might be more affected in family relationships than adults. There might be differences between women and men. Only 25 articles were reviewed which is a limited number and the result may not be very trustworthy. It also does not have a time frame on the reviewed article and there lacks some explanation on the several conflicts in the selected articles.

5 CONCLUSION

There is a significant bidirectional connection between depression and close relationships. Insecure romantic relationships including avoidant attachment and anxious attachment would result in higher depressive symptoms as secure romantic relationships show lower depressive symptoms. The relationship status such as break ups, as well as the intimacy and conflict within romantic relationships also affect the depressive symptoms significantly. More supportive and secure family environment leads to fewer depression. Social isolation would count as a risk factor to depression but not an influencer for existing depression. The understanding of the relationship between close relationships and depression helps for developing effective therapeutic interventions and forming healthier relationships. These findings address both the relational and individual aspects of depression, which helps the

psychologists and mental health professionals to better support individuals in healing and curing the depression and achieving emotional resilience.

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