Study: Teen Love Hurts

Falling In Love Makes Teens Prone to Depression and Alcohol Abuse

By Malcolm Ritter

Feb. 15

The most famous youthful romance in the English-speaking world, that star-crossed love of Romeo and Juliet, was a tragedy. Now researchers have published a huge study of real-life adolescents in love.

The results suggest that on balance, falling in love makes adolescents more depressed, and more prone to delinquency and alcohol abuse than they would have been if they’d avoided romance.

The reported effect on depression is small, but it’s bigger for girls than boys. The researchers suggest it could be one reason teen girls show higher rates of depression than teen boys do, a difference that persists into adulthood.

Teen Love Ain't Grand

This is not exactly the view of romance that prevails around Valentine’s Day. Researchers who’ve studied teenage love say that smaller studies had shown teen romance can cause emotional trouble, but that the new work overlooked some good things.

The study was done by sociologists Kara Joyner of Cornell University and J. Richard Udry of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. They presented the results in the December issue of the Journal of Health & Social Behavior.

Their results are based on responses from about 8,200 adolescents across the country who were interviewed twice, about a year apart, about a wide variety of things. The kids were ages 12 to 17 at the first interview.

To measure levels of depression, the researchers examined adolescents’ answers to 11 questions about the previous week, such as how often they felt they couldn’t shake off the blues, felt lonely or sad or got bothered by things that normally wouldn’t faze them.

Researchers Compared Teens In and Out of Romance

To see what love’s got to do with it, the researchers compared responses from adolescents who didn’t report any romantic involvement at either interview with those who reported it at both interviews. They looked at how much depression levels changed between interviews for each group.

The finding: The romantically involved adolescents showed a bigger increase in depression levels, or a smaller decrease, than uninvolved teens.
The difference wasn’t much. For boys of all ages, it was about one-half point on a 33-point scale. Girls were hit harder, with a 2-point difference for girls who’d been 12 at the first interview, and diminishing with age to about a half-point difference for girls who’d been 17.

Contradicts Adult Findings

The results were a surprise, because studies of adults have shown married people tend to be less depressed than single ones, Joyner said. So why would love lower adolescent mood?

By analyzing the adolescents’ answers to other questions, Joyner and Udry found evidence for three possible factors: deteriorating relationships with parents, poorer performance in school, and breakups of relationships.

In fact, it appeared that for boys, romance made a difference in depression only if they’d had a breakup between interviews. For girls, in contrast, the biggest impact from romance seemed to come from a rockier relationship with Mom and Dad. That was especially so among younger girls, where the bump in depression was biggest.

To Joyner, it makes sense that if a young daughter is dating, her parents may be concerned about her choice of partner or what she is doing with him. Presumably, their concern leads to arguments. That would be my guess.

But it’s only a guess. The study can’t prove what caused what. Maybe girls feeling less loved at home were more likely to seek romance with a guy, rather than the other way around.

Alcohol and Delinquency, Too

Joyner and Udry also found that romance was associated with a small decrease in happiness for girls, as assessed by different questions, and a small increase in alcohol problems and delinquency in both sexes. They didn’t look for explanations for the latter two findings.

Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, a University of Michigan psychologist who studies depression, said the study’s findings on that topic made sense. Many researchers who work on adolescent depression have thought that something about dating behavior and dating relationships can be toxic to girls’ health, she said.

The idea is that girls base their self-esteem on these relationships more than boys do and will contort themselves to make these relationships work, Nolen-Hoeksema said. I think there’s something to it.

It makes sense that dating could be one reason why female depression rates start to exceed male rates around age 14 or so, she said. But lots of things can promote depression, she cautioned, and not every girl who’s dating is depressed.

Critic: Study Too Negative

Reed Larson, who studies adolescent emotion at the University of Illinois in Urbana, thinks the new study focuses unfairly on love’s downside.

His own work has tracked adolescent emotions hour-by-hour and day-by-day by having participants
wear beepers, which prompt them at random times to write down how they are feeling.

Those results show adolescent love provokes a fusillade of strong feelings, both positive and negative, Larson said. Yes, there’s anger, worry, hurt, anxiety, jealousy and frustration. But there’s also happiness, joy, euphoria, thrills and, well, love.

Those can oscillate within the same day, Larson said. The same child will tell us at one moment in time they’re just on top of the world because they just had this great talk with John, and then a few hours later, they’re totally depressed because John is suddenly seeing somebody else. Then they’ll come back up because they had a good talk with John, and things are back on track.

And these feelings are a big part of adolescent life, Larson and colleagues found. In a sample of 14-year-olds to 17-year-olds, for example, girls said real or fantasized relationships with boys caused 34 percent of the strong emotions they’d reported. For boys the figure was 25 percent.

Even the lower figure is about twice the rate attributed to school and about three times the rate for family or same-sex friends.

Most of the emotions traced to girl-boy romance were positive, but 42 percent were negative, including anger and depression.

Wyndol Furman, a psychology professor at the University of Denver who studies adolescent romance, also cautioned that studies like Joyner’s tell only half the story.

It’s not like romantic relationships hold only danger for teens, without any benefit, he said.

“I don’t buy that, any more than the idea that driving a car is only dangerous,” he said. “There are risks. But are you going to give your car up?”

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