

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Anxiety Sensitivity in Adolescents at Risk for Psychopathology

Pollock, R. A., Carter, A. S., Avenevoli, S., Dierker, L. C., Chazan-Cohen, R., & Merikangas, K. R. (2002). Anxiety sensitivity in adolescents at risk for psychopathology. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 31(3), 343-353.
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SUMMARY: Adolescents were assessed to determine the associations between anxiety sensitivity and anxiety symptoms, anxiety disorders, and anxiety comorbidity. Both a control group and a group of adolescents whose parent or parents had an anxiety diagnosis and/or a substance use disorder were assessed to determine if the latter group was at risk for anxiety, substance abuse, or both. Anxiety sensitivity was associated with anxiety, but not depression symptoms. Adolescents of parents with a history of anxiety disorders were at increased risk for anxiety symptoms or disorders.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Anxiety sensitivity was specifically associated with the presence or absence of an anxiety disorder; it was not associated with depressive symptoms.
- The associations between anxiety sensitivity and anxiety symptoms were moderated by risk status, with adolescents who were at familial risk for anxiety evidencing an association that was not apparent for low-risk adolescents (those with parents without anxiety and/or substance disorders).
- Parental substance abuse was significantly associated with comorbid anxiety disorders, anxiety diagnoses, and depression symptoms in adolescents.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Facilitate support groups for Service members and their families who are struggling with mental health issues
- Educate military parents about how their mental health can influence the mental health of their children

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer courses for military youth about the dangers of excessive alcohol abuse, and how to deal with peer pressure to engage in addictive behavior
- Provide classes for military adolescents on effective methods of dealing with worry and anxiety (e.g., breathing exercises, imagery, relaxation techniques)

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that military personnel are assessed for substance abuse problems periodically throughout their military service
- Provide professional development to military family workers about how to recognize and work with people dealing with substance abuse and anxiety disorders

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METHODS

- Parents diagnosed with lifetime anxiety and/or substance use disorder and control parents who participated in a large family study of comorbidity of substance-use and anxiety disorders and their adolescent children (12-17) were recruited for this study.
- Parents completed a semi-structured interview for affective disorders and schizophrenia.
- Adolescents completed a semi-structured interview for affective disorders and schizophrenia and anxiety, anxiety sensitivity, and worry self-report measures.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 121 adolescents (12-17 years in age) and their parents also participated.
- The racial/ethnic composition of participants was 100% White.
- No additional demographic data were reported.

LIMITATIONS

- Few adolescents met criteria for anxiety disorders which restricted the ability to examine anxiety sensitivity across diagnostic subtype.
- There was very little demographic information presented; it is unknown how these findings may generalize to other youth.
- The study was correlational, and causal conclusions can not be made.
- The sample was selected for its risk of psychopathology, so results may not generalize to the general population.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the risks of youth whose parents have depressive disorders
- Investigate high-risk adolescents over time to monitor the development of anxiety disorders or symptoms
- Examine how parental deployment and military service influence children's mental health, including anxiety sensitivity

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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