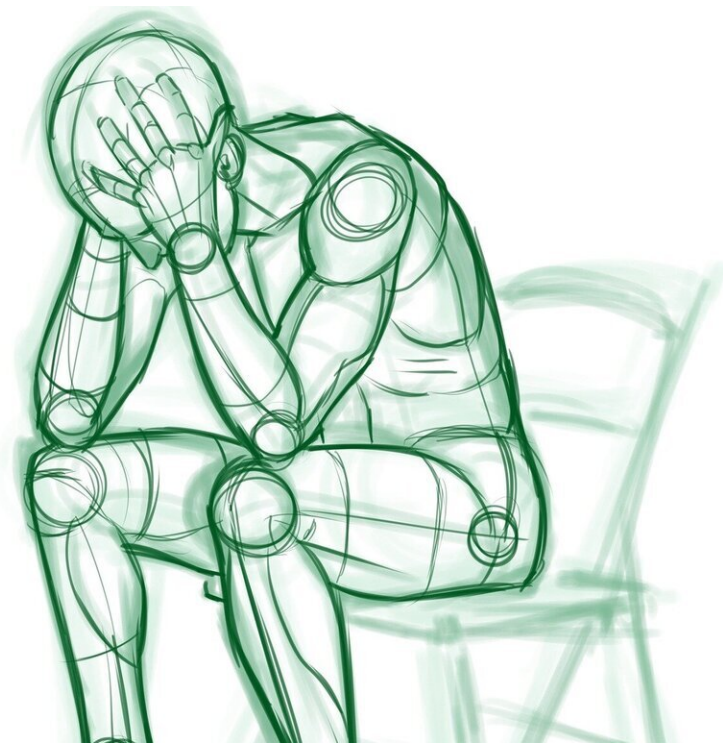


Parental stress a contributing factor linking maternal depression to child anxiety and depressive symptoms

December 1 2021, by Jaelyn Lyles



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A secondary analysis of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Fragile Families) found a bi-directional relationship where a mother's mental health symptoms impacted the child's mental health symptoms

and vice versa, according to researchers with Cizik School of Nursing at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth Houston).

The analysis, published Dec. 1 in the print edition of the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, investigated mother and child mental [health](#) symptoms over a 10-year period to provide new insights into the development of [depression](#) and anxiety among families. The research points to parental stress, or the processes and subsequent reactions that result from attempting to manage the challenges and burdens of parenthood, as the factor that partially links maternal depression and child anxiety and [depressive symptoms](#).

"By focusing on mother-child duos, we identified that maternal depression at an earlier time point predicted child anxiety and depressive symptoms at a later time point. Further, children who experienced anxiety and depressive symptoms at an earlier time point were more likely to have mothers who experienced depression at later time points," said Daphne Hernandez, Ph.D., associate professor and Lee and Joseph Jamail Distinguished Professor in the School of Nursing and senior author on the study.

Experiences with [maternal depression](#) increase feelings of being overwhelmed with the parenting role, contributing to hostility and lack of warmth in the [family](#) environment, according to the researchers. The lack of warmth could affect a child's mental health negatively.

The Fragile Families study began at Princeton University and Columbia University between 1998 and 2000 to study the outcomes of familial relationships of unmarried parents on their offspring. The large population-based sample has allowed researchers across the U.S. to provide insights into various family and relationship dynamics.

The researchers' findings have the opportunity to guide suggestions for mental health treatments for families where both mothers and children are experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression.

"A dual intervention, where both mother and child are receiving treatment together, in addition to their separate treatment plans, may be a successful approach for families where mothers and children exhibit symptoms of anxiety and depression," Hernandez said. "Most importantly, implementing strategies to lower parental stress is vital."

More information: Sajeevika S. Daundasekara et al, Parenting stress mediates the longitudinal effect of maternal depression on child anxiety/depressive symptoms, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2021.08.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.08.002)

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