



The Association between Self-Image in Adolescence and Relationship Satisfaction in Adulthood



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Introduction

- Adolescence is recognized as the most critical developmental period of life in terms of self-exploration, and the possibilities one's life has to offer (Rivera & Munoz, 2011).
- At the same time, depression is more common in adolescents than adults (Miller & Campo, 2021), a connection that is reflected in individual self-esteem and happiness as adolescents transition into adulthood.
- Higher self-esteem has been found to be a precursor for the development of self-compassion, the ability to perceive oneself (Donald et al., 2018; Neff, 2011).
- Further studies have correlated self-esteem with health. Signs of depression as a factor of low self-esteem result in negative mental and physical health impacts.
- The connection between adolescents' ability to perceive themselves in a positive manner (self-image) and their success in developing satisfying and healthy intimate relationships has yet to be further explored.

Methods

Sample

- Adolescent respondents (n=6,504) in grades 7-12 were drawn from Wave I of the U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (AddHealth), a longitudinal study (1994-2018). Wave I was conducted between 1994 and 1995.
- The same adolescents, followed into adulthood (n=4,196), represent wave V of the AddHealth longitudinal study. Respondents are in their late 30s and early 40s. Wave V was conducted between 2016 and 2018.

Measures

- Adolescent Self-image was measured with a series of six questions about self-impressions of physical appearance, success, and social ability. Responses were coded on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), then summed. Adolescent self-image scores ranged from 3 to 18.
- Adolescent Depression was measured with a series of four questions about how often respondents exhibit symptoms of depression. Responses were coded on a scale from 1 (not often) to 5 (very often), then summed. Adolescent depression scores ranged from 0 to 11.
- Adult Relationship Satisfaction was measured with a sum of two questions about general happiness with the romantic relationship, and satisfaction with intimacy. Scores ranged from 1 to 5.

Research Questions

- Is adolescent self-image associated with the level of success in establishing fulfilling and healthy intimate relationships in adulthood?
- Does the association between adolescent self-image and adulthood intimate relationship satisfaction differ for individuals based on whether they presented symptoms of depression in adolescence?

Results

Univariate

- 23% of adolescent respondents displayed a Self-Image score of 12 (Figure 1).
- 50% of adolescent respondents displayed a depression score of 1 or 2 (figure 2). Mean depression score among adolescents was 1.88.
- 5% of adult respondents presented a relationship satisfaction score of 5 (very satisfied).

Bivariate

- A Pearson correlation analysis test showed that there is a weak ($r=0.27$) positive and statistically significant ($p<0.001$) correlation between adolescent self-image and depression scores.
- A separate Pearson correlation analysis test showed that there is a **very weak** ($r=0.0831$) but statistically significant ($p<0.001$) positive correlation between adolescent self-image and adult relationship satisfaction.

Multivariate

- Adult respondents with an adolescent Self-Image Score of 12 and adolescent Depression Score of 1 displayed a mean Relationship Satisfaction score of 3.06 on the 5-point scale (Relative Satisfaction).
- Adult respondents with an adolescent Self-Image score of 12 and adolescent Depression score of 2 displayed a mean Relationship Satisfaction score of 3.18.
- Adult respondents with an adolescent Self-Image Score of 12 and adolescent Depression score of 3 displayed a mean Relationship Satisfaction score of 3.28

Figure 1. Self-Image Score among adolescents by percent frequency

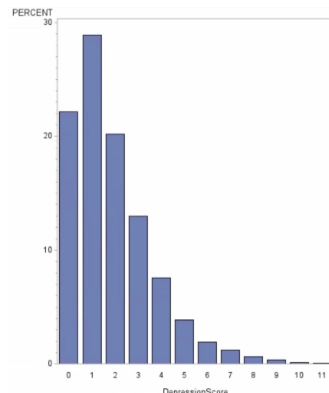
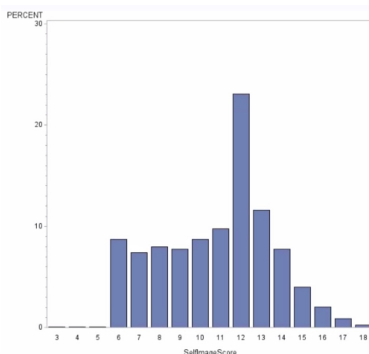


Figure 2. Depression Score among adolescents by percent frequency

- Mean adult Relationship Satisfaction appears to increase with increased adolescent Depression scores, though the relationship between self-image in adolescence and adult relationship satisfaction is found to be weak.

Discussion

- Adolescent sense of self-image has not been found to be significantly associated with the relationship satisfaction of adult relationships in the present research project.
- Individuals with increasing, yet relatively low (scores 1-3) depression symptoms in adolescence may be more likely to develop more satisfying intimate and romantic relationships in adulthood.
- Present findings are based on weakly-associated variables and may not be complete representations of every potential factor determining relationship satisfaction among adults.
- This information could be used to learn more about the potential effects of adolescent depression and self-image on adult relationships, past the romantic and intimate.
- Further research is needed to determine other, potentially stronger, influences on adult intimate relationship development and satisfaction.

Rivera, D., Cruz, C., & Munoz, C. (2011). Satisfaction in Intimate Relationships in Emerging Adulthood: The Role of Attachment, Intimacy and Depression. *Terapia psicológica*, 29(1), 77-83.
Miller, L., & Campo, J. V. (2021). Depression in Adolescents. *The New England journal of medicine*, 385(5), 445-449.
Donald, J. N., Ciarrochi, J., Parker, P. D., Sahdra, B. K., Marshall, S. L., & Guo, J. (2018). A worthy self is a caring self: Examining the developmental relations between self-esteem and self-compassion in adolescents. *Journal of personality*, 86(4), 619-630.
Neff, K. D. (2011). Self-Compassion, Self-Esteem, and Well-Being. *Social and personality psychology compass*, 5(1), 1-12.