To examine the relationship between attachment anxiety and depression in adolescence, we examined associations between insecure attachment to caregivers, affect dysregulation, and depressive symptoms. This study utilized data from a longitudinal project examining gender and psychopathology among high-risk youth to examine internalizing problems during adolescence.

OBJECTIVES

To examine whether dimensions of insecure attachment to mothers and fathers, specifically attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety, relate to depressive symptoms in a clinical sample of adolescent girls and boys;

To examine concurrent associations between insecure attachment to caregivers, affect dysregulation and depressive symptoms.

RESULTS

Table 1. Zero-order Correlations between Study Variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Attachment Anxiety (mothers)</th>
<th>Attachment Anxiety (fathers)</th>
<th>Affect Dysregulation</th>
<th>Depressive Symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Anxiety (mothers)</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Anxiety (fathers)</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect Dysregulation</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressive Symptoms</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Taken together, results of the present study suggest that attachment anxiety to maternal and paternal caregivers is an important factor in predicting affect dysregulation in adolescents at-risk. Items assessing this construct tap difficulties with emotion regulation that have been associated with depression (e.g., Brenning et al., 2012; Kulik & Pettersson, 2013; Malik et al., 2015).

Affect dysregulation partially mediated the relationship between attachment anxiety to mothers and fathers, respectively, and depressive symptoms. Based on theory and prior research, it was expected that the association between insecure attachment and depressive symptoms would be fully mediated by affect dysregulation as its features (e.g., heightened emotional arousal and intensity) are associated with disturbances in mood (Margaris et al., 2013). One explanation for this finding may be that feelings of worry about the availability of important others (anxious attachment) may in themselves lead to a sense of (actual or potential) abandonment or loneliness and accompanying depressive feelings.

The present study did not examine longitudinal relationships and hence no interpretations can be offered regarding causality. There is a possibility that dysregulation affect precedes attachment insecurity across development. Future research is also needed to determine whether the associations reported emerge across adolescence and into young adulthood.

Gender differences were not examined in this study; however, future studies should examine the moderating role of gender as there may be important differences in emotional functioning and depressive symptoms in girls versus boys.

REFERENCES


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