

Researchers Map Path of Second-Hand Emotions in Families

Like second-hand smoke, frequent exposure to negative emotions can have a toxic effect on family members, according to psychologists engaged in a new program of research that provides repeated sampling of mood and experiences.

A recent set of articles published in the February issue of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* indicates that negative emotions can create a chain reaction of distress that moves through a family and affects the behavior and health of the individuals who are the most susceptible receivers. The researchers have also mapped the path of these emotional spillovers which appears to follow the order of power in the family, from fathers to mothers to children.

The four articles highlight the process of emotional transmission and provide a promising model for understanding the daily passage and subsequent, predictive influence of one's daily experiences and emotions on other family members, according to lead editors David Almeida of the University of Arizona and Reed Larson of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The researchers used a variety of intensive, daily or hourly collection methods including the use of diaries, telephone reports, and pagers to chart family members' immediate accounts of their activities and emotions. Controlled statistical procedures were used to determine patterns of emotions being transmitted from one family member to another.

The process allows researchers to observe the daily ebb and flow of typical family experiences and to gain a glimpse of the conditions that might contribute to or buffer the spreading and receiving of negative emotions, according to Almeida.

"We all have bad days and negative interactions," says Almeida. "This work brings a new awareness that being in a negative mood, being unaccessible or generally grouchy can have a noxious effect on the well-being of our families."

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Among findings in the studies:

- Emotions are most often passed from husbands to wives and from parents to children, possibly reflecting differences in power in families as well as gender differences in empathy and receptivity.
- Negative emotions, like anger, depression and anxiety, are more likely to be transmitted than positive emotions. None of the studies find evidence of contagious joy in families.
- Negative emotions appear to be more infectious, potent and have longer lasting effects than positive emotions.
- Fathers bringing home negative emotions from work that affect other family members emerged as a common pattern. Regardless of family structure, whether one-or-two-parent, women appear better able to contain work stress and, in fact, may strive to have more positive family interactions to compensate for a bad day.
- In situations where there is clear justification for the negative emotions, families members tend to give one another some slack, and the emotions are less likely to be transmitted. For example, in families where mothers had a chronic pain condition, her negative feelings were less likely to affect others. In couples where one partner was taking the New York Bar Examination, emotional transmission was suppressed during the stressful preparation period but became evident again once the exam was finished.
- In the process of transmission, especially along paths of family power, an emotion can be transformed from sender to receiver. For example, scorn in one person may induce shame in another; anger

in a powerful person may create anxiety in a less-powerful family member.

The authors of the papers believe that the repeated daily experience of second-hand emotions from other family members may be a means by which parental distress, anger or depression leads to anxiety, depression or detrimental health conditions in other family members, particularly children.

"We've been studying families for a long time and know that distressed parents tend to have distressed children," says Almeida. "Looking at the daily experiences might explain part of this connection."

With solid evidence that emotional transmission takes place and emerging patterns, such as the significant impact of fathers' emotions and the willingness to indulge justifiable agitation, the next step is to look for conditions and interventions that can limit the spread and modify the effect of negative moods on families.

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The set of articles in the journal, the quarterly publication of the National Council on Family Relations, include:

-- "Second-Hand Emotions: Emotional Transmission in Families" by Reed W. Larson and David M. Almeida.

-- "Transmission of Emotions in the Daily Interactions of Single-Mother Families" by Reed W. Larson and Sally Gillman (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).

-- "Emotional Transmission in Couples Under Stress" by Anne Thompson and Niall Bolger (University of New York).

-- "Daily Transmission of Tensions Between Marital Dyads and Parent-Child Dyads" by David M. Almeida, Elaine Wethington (Cornell University) and Amy L. Chandler (University of Arizona).

-- "Anger Transmission from Mother to Child: A Comparison of Mothers in Chronic Pain and Well Mothers" by Geraldine

Downey, Valerie Purdie and Rebecca Schaffer-Neitz (Columbia University).

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