

# Co-Rumination and Co-Problem Solving in the Daily Lives of Adolescents With Major Depressive Disorder

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**Objective:** This study examines differences in the prevalence and nature of co-rumination during real-world social interactions with peers and parents among adolescents with major depressive disorder (MDD) compared to healthy controls. **Method:** A total of 60 youth (29 with current MDD and 31 controls without psychopathology) completed a self-report measure of co-rumination and a 3-week ecological momentary assessment (EMA) protocol that measured the nature of face-to-face social interactions with peers and parents after a negative event in the adolescents' daily lives. Specifically, EMA was used to assess rates of problem talk, including both co-rumination and co-problem solving. Group differences in self-report and EMA measures were examined. **Results:** Adolescents with MDD reported co-ruminating more often than adolescents with no Axis 1 disorders during daily interactions with both parents (Cohen's  $d = 0.78$ ) and peers ( $d = 1.14$ ), and also reported more co-rumination via questionnaire ( $d = 0.58$ ). Adolescents with MDD engaged in co-problem solving with peers less often than did healthy controls ( $d = 0.78$ ), but no group differences were found for rates of co-problem solving with parents. **Conclusions:** Results are consistent with previous research linking co-rumination and depression in adolescence and extend these self-report-based findings to assessment in an ecologically valid context. Importantly, the results support that MDD youth tend to co-ruminate more and to problem-solve less with peers in their daily lives compared to healthy youth, and that co-rumination also extends to parental relationships. Interventions focused on decreasing co-rumination with peers and parents and improving problem-solving skills with peers may be helpful for preventing and treating adolescent depression. *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry*, 2014;53(8):869–878. **Key Words:** co-rumination, depression, problem solving, ecological momentary assessment

Talking about a problem or distressing experience with others is a common, everyday human experience, often motivated by our need for help with solving a problem or regulating negative emotion. Engaging others to assist with emotion regulation begins during infancy<sup>1-3</sup> and continues into adulthood.<sup>2</sup> As adolescents grow more independent from parents and rely increasingly on peers such as friends and romantic partners for provision of social affiliative needs,<sup>4,5</sup> it becomes particularly important that they select social partners who are skilled in assisting with this interpersonal process of emotional regulation.

Difficulty obtaining the socio-emotional benefits of interpersonal relationships is commonly associated with depression. For example, dysfunctional interpersonal behaviors associated with depression, such as negative feedback seeking,<sup>6</sup> excessive reassurance seeking,<sup>7</sup> or social withdrawal,<sup>8</sup> are believed to maintain depressive symptoms by interfering with normative social exchange.<sup>6-9</sup> Importantly, dysregulation of emotion is considered to be one of the hallmarks of depression during adolescence,<sup>10</sup> with theorists emphasizing the role of social dysfunction in emotional dysregulation.<sup>11-13</sup>

A breakdown in the effectiveness of discussing problems with others has been cited as a possible risk for depression among youth.<sup>14,15</sup> Co-rumination refers to a pattern of interpersonal



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behavior characterized by “frequently discussing problems, discussing the same problem repeatedly, mutual encouragement of discussing problems, speculating about problems, and focusing on negative feelings.”<sup>14</sup> Although co-rumination appears to be socially functional, with youth who engage in co-rumination with peers reporting higher friendship quality,<sup>15</sup> it is associated concurrently<sup>14,16</sup> and prospectively<sup>15,17</sup> with higher rates of depressive symptoms among children and adolescents.

These findings are consistent with evidence that involuntary engagement strategies for regulating affect, such as rumination, are less effective than more active strategies for regulating negative affect, such as problem solving, in adolescents.<sup>18,19</sup> Social partners who are engaged in co-rumination actively encourage each other to ruminate about a distressing event or emotion.<sup>14</sup> By fostering rumination, co-rumination is unlikely to improve mood. In contrast, by supporting a more productive form of coping, social partners who facilitate problem solving may be more effective than co-ruminators in assisting with emotion regulation. This may be particularly true when discussing more controllable events (i.e., in situations that could actually be improved by problem solving).<sup>18</sup>

Because adolescence is a key developmental period for the shift from a primary focus on social interaction with parents to an increasing focus on peer relations,<sup>4,5</sup> it is important to assess how adolescents discuss problems with both parents and peers. Youth whose interactions with peers are characterized by levels of problem solving similar to levels observed during interactions with parents may be more successful in obtaining positive, rewarding experiences—including help coping with negative experiences—from peer relations, thus indicating they are making a smoother transition away from a central reliance on parents. On the other hand, youth who frequently co-ruminate and rarely problem-solve with peers may be less successful in negotiating the socio-emotional transitions of adolescence and may be at greater risk for emotional difficulties.

Most studies of co-rumination have involved community samples.<sup>14-17</sup> However, 2 studies to date examined co-rumination in relation to *DSM-IV* major depressive disorder (MDD). In the first study,<sup>20</sup> adolescents who reported more co-rumination at baseline were more likely to experience a major depressive episode within 2 years;

among those who became depressed, greater co-rumination predicted longer, more severe major depressive episodes. In the second study,<sup>21</sup> co-rumination was found to be linked to a past history of MDD. The present study is the first to examine the prevalence of co-rumination among adolescents currently meeting *DSM-IV* criteria for MDD.

This existing research on co-rumination in adolescence has relied primarily on self-report questionnaires, which may be limited by retrospective reporting biases and do not capture subtle differences in the content of peer discussion about problems. The current study introduces an ecological momentary assessment (EMA) approach to assessing co-rumination in daily life. By assessing participants' social and emotional functioning during daily social interactions over several weeks, EMA provides a more ecologically valid measurement of adolescents' actual day-to-day experiences than do global self-report measures. Although EMA has been used to study affective and social functioning among adolescents with depression,<sup>22,23</sup> this is the first application of EMA to examine co-rumination or co-problem solving in this population. EMA permits a fine-grained examination of daily social interactions, allowing us to examine how often youth talk about problems with others and how often this problem talk involves co-rumination.

This study also extends previous work by examining the prevalence of *productive* interpersonal interactions, such as problem solving with others, in addition to dysfunctional interpersonal behavior, such as co-rumination. An important element of co-rumination is the tendency to engage in co-rumination to the exclusion of other forms of social interaction.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it seems reasonable to expect that individuals who engage in co-rumination may also be less likely to engage in co-problem solving (i.e., problem solving with others).

Although most studies of co-rumination to date have focused on examining co-rumination in interactions between friends,<sup>14,15</sup> there is a burgeoning interest in co-rumination within other close relationships. For example, co-rumination between mothers and adolescents has recently been linked to depressive symptoms in community samples.<sup>24,25</sup> In the current study, we used EMA methods to examine co-rumination and co-problem solving during face-to-face social interactions with both peers and parents.

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