



Do friends' co-rumination and communication with parents prevent depressed adolescents from self-harm?



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of both ease of communication with parents and co-rumination with one's best friend in the link between depressive symptoms and self-harm in a sample of Italian adolescents. Furthermore, it analyzes the possible differences between boys and girls in this link. Questionnaires were administered at a six-month interval at 711 adolescents attending three different schools ($M_{age} = 15.53$). Moderation and multiple-group analyses were conducted using a path approach. Results showed both ease of communication with parents and co-rumination with one's best friend decreasing the likelihood of engaging in self-harm. Depressed adolescents were less likely to develop self-harm when they perceived communication with parents as easy. Multiple-group analysis verified this relation only for girls. The findings highlight the importance of interpersonal relationships in decreasing the likelihood of engaging in self-harm, and stress the role of a positive family setting in helping particularly depressed girls not to self-harm.

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Individuals with depressive symptoms can have a tough life during adolescence. They may experience negative emotional feelings, such as anxiety and stress (e.g., Brady & Kendall, 1992; Schraedley, Gotlib, & Hayward, 1999), and low self-esteem (e.g., Lewinsohn, Roberts, et al., 1994). Further, adolescents with depressive symptoms tend to have a pessimistic attitude towards life (Lewinsohn, Roberts, et al., 1994; Lewinsohn, Rohde, et al., 1994). They seem to be at greater risk of suicide attempt and completion than adolescents without such symptoms (e.g., Lewinsohn, Rohde, et al., 1994; Weissman et al., 1999), and they report higher levels of risk behaviors, such as marijuana and alcohol use (e.g., Saluja et al., 2004). In addition, recent cross-sectional studies (e.g., Giletta, Scholte, Engels, Clairano, & Prinstein, 2012; Laukkanen et al., 2009; Ross & Heath, 2002) and a few longitudinal studies (e.g., Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Stattin, 2013; O'Connor, Rasmussen, & Hawton, 2009), conducted using normative samples, show that depressed youth are more likely to perform self-harm than their non-depressed peers. According to these studies, there is evidence that depressive symptoms in youth may trigger self-harm. However, not all the adolescents who show depressive symptoms perform self-harm. In this study, we attempt to establish whether both,

communication with parents, as well as with one's best friend act as protective factors, and prevent youth with depressive symptoms from engaging in self-harm.

Deliberate self-harm has been defined as “the deliberate, *direct* destruction or alteration of body tissue, without conscious suicidal intent but resulting in injury severe enough for tissue damage to occur” (Gratz, 2003, p. 192). It includes actions such as burning, hitting, or scratching the surface of one's own body. Some authors have tried to explain why people self-harm. One possible explanation is offered by Chapman, Gratz, and Brown (2006). According to their model, youth damage their own body to decrease or avoid negative and unwanted emotional experiences, such as depressive symptoms. Deliberate self-harm, as an *experiential avoidance behavior*, enables the regulation of negative emotional states perceived as overwhelming (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). When experiences evoke negative emotions, people feel the urge to escape from their negative state, and they use self-harm to eliminate or avoid negative emotional arousal. As the use of self-harm gives temporary relief in the face of negative emotional experiences (Chapman et al., 2006), individuals engage in further self-harming behaviors when they experience new negative emotional arousals. Hence, self-harm becomes an automatic response every time some youth experience negative emotions that they are unable to handle and want to escape from. In line with this model, studies have shown that self-harm can be used as a strategy to regulate negative emotions in general (e.g., Chapman & Dixon-Gordon, 2007; Klonsky, 2011) and depressive symptoms in particular (Laye-Gindhu & Schonert-Reichl, 2005). However, not all depressed youth cope with

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such symptoms by using self-harm. Thus, it can be hypothesized that some other factors help youth to choose more adaptive coping strategies than self-harm when they are depressed.

A vast literature has shown that a positive relationship with parents has long-term effects on youth well-being during adolescence. Indeed, studies have shown open communication with parents during adolescence, described as the ease with which thoughts and feelings are communicated to parents (Barnes & Olson, 1985), to be an element that increases adolescents' wellbeing, and self-esteem, and also a factor that promotes the development of adaptive social and coping skills (e.g., Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra, & Bosma, 1998). Also, living in a supportive family helps youth to deal with negative feelings, thereby decreasing the likelihood of them exhibiting depressive symptoms (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003). Overall, parent–child communication seems to be a protective factor that helps adolescents to deal with distressing emotional experiences.

Although communicating with parents seems to have a positive effect on the emotional adjustment of adolescents, the effect of communicating with peers on adolescents' socioemotional trade-offs seems less clear. For example, it has been proposed that co-rumination is a process that has both positive and negative effects on adolescent adjustment. Co-rumination refers to "excessively discussing personal problems within a dyadic relationship" (Rose, 2002, p. 1830). On the one hand, several studies have indicated that co-rumination is a strategy that increases the risk of depressive symptoms (e.g., Rose, 2002; Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007). On the other, co-rumination has been conceptualized as an adaptive coping strategy. In line with this second conceptualization, Tompkins, Hockett, Abraibesh, and Witt (2011) showed a positive relation between co-rumination and a general measure of individual coping strategies when a group of adolescents were exposed to family conflicts, i.e., at a time when they needed to handle negative emotions. Self-harm has been seen as a strategy to cope with negative emotional experiences (e.g., Chapman et al., 2006), and adolescents who feel particularly lonely and abandoned by others have been regarded as more likely to use self-harm to deal with such feelings (e.g., Hankin & Abela, 2011; Ross & Heath, 2002). On the basis of these findings, two possibilities can be advanced. One is that having a friend to talk to, even in the form of co-rumination, may help adolescents to find new coping strategies that prevent them from engaging in self-harm as a means of coping with depressive symptoms. The other is that, due to the excessive focus on problems and negative affects that is typical of co-rumination, the depressive symptoms experienced by adolescents may be exacerbated, thereby increasing their likelihood of engaging in self-harm. To our knowledge, these hypotheses have not yet been tested. All in all, the conditions under which the relation between co-rumination and self-harm is unveiled deserve further investigation.

If children who open themselves up to both parents and friends are more able to cope with negative emotions, does this mean that they will be less likely to use self-harm to cope with depressive symptoms? The literature on self-harm has focused predominantly on factors that increase the likelihood of engaging in self-harm. However, there is a lack of studies of factors that hinder the development and escalation of such behavior. Since various studies have shown communication with parents to be a protective factor against the development of internalizing problems (e.g., Ivanova & Israel, 2005; White, Bruce, Farrell, & Kliever, 1998), we wondered, first of all, whether ease of communication with parents can also help youth who are experiencing depressive symptoms not to cope with them by engaging in self-harm. Second, we wondered whether co-rumination with one's best friend can make adolescents who experience depressive symptoms less likely to use self-harm as a coping strategy. As stated above, the conceptualization of co-rumination as a strategy for coping with stressful situations is far from clear (Tompkins et al., 2011). However, we hypothesize that talking with a trustworthy friend, even in the extreme form represented by co-rumination, may help adolescents with depressive symptoms avoid being overwhelmed by negative feelings, and decrease the

likelihood of them engaging in self-harm as a coping strategy. This hypothesis is in line with a theory of Nock and Prinstein that rests on a postulated communicative function of self-harm (Nock, 2008; Nock & Prinstein, 2004). According to this theory, youth harm themselves to communicate their need for help while they are dealing with negative feelings. Accordingly, adolescents who experience depressive symptoms and who co-ruminate with their best friend may satisfy their need to share their emotions, and are less likely to harm themselves. To our knowledge, this hypothesis has not yet been tested. Hence, we investigate the aspects of both family and close friendship that might buffer the effects of adverse conditions, such as depressive symptoms, that bear on the development of self-harm during adolescence.

Regarding emotional expression, previous studies showed that parents are more likely to encourage male offspring to inhibit their negative emotions, such as sadness (e.g., Chaplin, Cole, & Zahn-Waxler, 2005), and to encourage female offspring to express and explore the reasons behind their negative emotions (e.g., Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Zeman, 2007; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). Compared to boys, girls are more inclined to share personal issues with their parents (e.g., Crockett, Brown, Russell, & Shen, 2007; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006). Moreover, they disclose and co-ruminate more with their best friend than boys (e.g., Rose, 2002; Rose et al., 2007). Based on these findings, we hypothesize that both perception of ease of communication with parents and the tendency to co-ruminate with one's best friend will have a stronger effect on girls than on boys. Perceiving communication with parents as easy and co-ruminating with one's best friend will help girls find ways of dealing with their emotions other than self-harm. This might not be true for boys, who might have been reinforced in inhibiting their negative symptoms, and who might not get special benefits from sharing negative experiences with both parents and friends. Despite the paramount importance of communication in emotional regulation, especially when talking about negative styles such as self-harm, no study has tested these hypotheses.

The present study

In this study, we attempted to understand the roles of adolescents' communication with parents and co-rumination with one's best friend in the relation between depressive symptoms and self-harm in a sample of Italian adolescents. Unlike in a majority of studies of self-harm, we adopted a longitudinal design. First, we tested whether adolescents' perception of ease of communication with parents buffers the effect of depressive symptoms on self-harm. Also, within the same model, we tested whether co-rumination with one's best friend moderates the effect of depressive symptoms on self-harm. Second, we examined whether gender moderates the ways in which perceptions of both ease of communication with parents and co-rumination with one's best friend affect the link between depressive symptoms and self-harm. In sum, we examined the protective role of young people sharing negative thoughts and feelings with some of the persons most important to them during adolescence, i.e., their parents and their best friend, in the development of self-harm. Specifically, we tested whether adolescents who communicate easily with their parents and who co-ruminate with their best friend are less likely to harm themselves when they experience depressive symptoms. Lastly, we examined whether these relations are stronger for girls than for boys.

Method

Participants

A total of 832 students participated in this study. Both parents and adolescents gave their consent for the participation in the survey at both time points. However, although we also obtained the consent of all students at T2 (the time of the second data collection), some

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