

News RELEASE

American Psychiatric Association, 1000 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 1825, Arlington, VA 22209

For Information Contact:

Amy Levey 703-907-8534
ALevey@psych.org

Embargoed:

August 1, 2003
Release No. 03-33

Suicide Attempts in Adults Influence Suicidal Tendencies in Their Children – Study

Arlington, VA - Children of parents who have attempted suicide and who also have siblings with a history of suicide attempt are at high risk for a suicide attempt at an early age, according to a study to be published in the August *American Journal of Psychiatry*, the monthly scientific journal of the American Psychiatric Association.

The study sought to determine whether the risk for familial transmission of suicidal behavior is greater with increased number of relatives with suicidal attempts, and whether the transmission of suicidal behavior is related to the transmission of impulsive aggression.

The authors of the study, led by David A. Brent, M.D., of the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and J. John Mann, M.D., of the New York State Psychiatric Institute, studied suicide attempts in offspring with three types of family history. The study compared children of these groups: 1) suicide attempters with a sibling who also attempted suicide, 2) suicide attempters whose siblings never made a suicide attempt, and 3) nonsuicidal people whose siblings have not engaged in suicidal behavior.

All of the groups had parents with mood disorders, while two of the groups had parents who had also attempted suicide. The three groups had similar rates of mood disorders and substance use disorders, yet different rates of anxiety, social phobia and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The investigators expected that offspring of parents who made suicide attempts and had siblings who also had attempted suicide would be the most likely to have children with suicide attempts, and that familial transmission of suicidal behavior would be associated with higher impulsive aggression in offspring. Parents who attempted suicide and had siblings who attempted suicide were more likely to have children who attempted suicide than were parents who had not made suicide attempts. Parent attempters with sibling attempters also had children who made suicide attempts at younger ages than the children of parents who attempted suicide and did not have siblings who had also made attempts. Impulsive aggression was associated with a higher risk of suicide attempts and lower age at first attempt. In families with the strongest histories of suicide attempts, the levels of impulsive aggression in parents and in children were highest.

Among both groups of offspring of parents who attempted suicide, the first attempt typically did less physical harm and demonstrated weaker suicidal intent than was evidenced by the parents' attempts.

The study suggests that a strong family history of suicidal behavior was associated with a greater risk of suicidal behavior and earlier age at first suicide attempt in offspring, as well as greater impulsive aggression in both parents and offspring.

The study also suggests that the transmission of impulsive aggression may influence onset of suicidal acts by increasing the tendency to act on powerful suicidal feelings. These results are consistent with studies of teen suicide attempters, whose parents are 4-6 times more likely to have made a suicide attempt or committed suicide, and strongly support a familial, and perhaps genetic component to suicidal behavior which is related to impulsive aggression.

The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society, founded in 1844, whose more than 35,000 physician members specialize in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. For more information, visit the APA Web site at www.psych.org.

###