The Effects of Maternal Depression on Child Development

Major Depressive Disorder is one of the most common mental illnesses, affecting 6.7% of American adults each year. For women, the onset of depression and other mood disorders is highest during their typical childbearing and child-rearing ages, between 25 and 32 years old (Kessler et al., 2005). Because of this, a great deal of research has gone into studying the effect of a mother’s mental illness on her children’s development and mental health.

The results of many studies have shown that children of depressed mothers are at high risk for depression during childhood and adolescence. They are also at a higher risk for anxiety disorders, social impairment and alcohol dependence (Weissman and Jensen, 2002). According to one review of the literature, 61% of the children of parents with Major Depressive Disorder will develop a psychiatric disorder during childhood or adolescence. These children are four times more likely to develop a mood disorder than are children with non-ill parents (Beardslee et al., 1998). Children of depressed mothers are also significantly more likely to report suicidal thoughts and behaviors than children of well mothers (Klimes-Dougan et al., 1999).

While family studies have shown that some individuals may have inherited a genetic predisposition for major depression, many hypotheses about the effect maternal depression has on child development have focused on the influence of marital difficulties and parenting problems. Parents with mental illnesses have been shown to exhibit more maladaptive parental behaviors such as harsh punishment, verbal abuse, and spending smaller amounts of time with their children (Johnson et al., 2001). Their ability to provide a nurturing environment might be impaired and they might be less responsive to
their child’s needs. Children of depressed mothers form less secure attachment relationships with their caregivers. Likewise, marital difficulties such as frequent loud arguments can impact the family environment and may cause stress and anxiety for children (Beardslee et al., 1998).

Maternal mental illness can be seen as a risk factor for depression, mental health and substance abuse problems throughout childhood and adolescence (Weissman and Jensen, 2002). Therefore, treatment of depressed mothers as well as early detection for their offspring is important. Fortunately, a recent study has shown that while children of depressed mothers do exhibit more mental health and behavioral problems than children of healthy mothers, they respond to treatment equally as well (Rishel et al., 2006).

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References:


