

Feeling Connected Helps Women Avoid Depression

By Miranda Hitti

WebMD Medical News

on Thursday, February 03, 2005

Reviewed By Michael Smith, MD

Feb. 3, 2005 -- To avoid depression, one of the best things a woman can do may be to build a strong supportive network.

Feeling loved, cared for, and being well integrated in positive social groups protects women against future depression, says Kenneth Kendler, MD, in a news release.

But that's not true for men, says Kendler, a psychiatry and human genetics professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. "Men may be more 'immune' or less sensitive to aspects of their social environment with respect to their risk for depression."

Kendler and colleagues recently studied depression and social support among men and women. Their findings appear in February's *American Journal of Psychiatry*.

Every year, depression strikes an estimated 18 million people in the U.S. About twice as many women as men have depression, says the National Institute for Mental Health. No one knows why that is. Genetics, hormones, and life circumstances may all be involved. Still, depression is treatable if people seek help.

Brothers vs. Sisters

Kendler's study focused on social support. Being connected to others has repeatedly been shown to help mind and body. Compared with men, women tend to have larger social networks and rely on their connections for emotional support, say the researchers.

About 1,000 sets of opposite-sex twins participated in the study. Each set of twins shared half of the same genes -- the same as for any brother and sister -- and were raised in the same home. That way, any effect from genetics and family environment was similar.

The twins were interviewed twice, at least a year apart, starting at ages 21 to 58. Questions included support from family and friends as well as social integration. For instance, the researchers asked how frequently the twins attended clubs, organizations, church, or other religious services.

They also talked about having people to confide in. During both interviews, the twins were also screened for depression.

Where Women Get Support

For women, having high levels of social support strongly reduced the risk of depression. That included support from six out of seven sources: the women's twin, other relatives, friends, parents, spouse, and social integration. Children were the only source of support that didn't cut women's depression risk.

In contrast, depression was more likely for women who didn't sense social support. A lack of social support predicted future depression among the women, say the researchers.

Men Network Differently

For men, the results were totally different. Social support barely affected their depression risk, and none of the seven factors predicted depression.

That might be because men often use their social networks differently. Emotional support might not be the goal. Instead of pouring their hearts out to a friend, men may take another approach.

"Men may turn to their network, but interactions are likely to be focused on shared activities or 'distractions,'" write the researchers.

SOURCES: Kendler, K. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, February 2005; vol 162: pp 250-256. National Institute of Mental Health, "Depression." News release, Virginia Commonwealth University.

© 2005 WebMD Inc. All rights reserved.