Strong friendships in adolescence may benefit mental health in the long run

By Ana Sandoiu

*Medical News Today*

26 August 2017

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

As a teenager, few things are as important as having close friends with whom to share intimate secrets over long phone conversations. But do these friendships also benefit us into adulthood? A new study investigates.

Researchers at the University of Virginia (UV) in Charlottesville set out the examine the long-term impact of having strong friendships in adolescence on mental health as an adult.

The new study was published in the journal Child Development, and the lead author of the study was Rachel K. Narr, a Ph.D. candidate in clinical psychology at UV's Department of Psychology.

Studies referenced by the authors have shown that teenagers with close friendships tend to be more adaptive to stress, report being happier due to an increased feeling of uniqueness, and are likely to do better academically. Additionally, they tend to have higher self-esteem and are more assertive.

But do some of these benefits last into adulthood? To find out, Narr and colleagues examined a community of 169 teenagers aged 15, and they followed them for a period of 10 years until they turned 25.

Of these, 58 percent were Caucasian, 29 percent were African American, and 8 percent were of mixed race. The median income of their families was between $40,000 and $59,999.

Narr and team examined the teenagers every year, asking them to fill in questionnaires reporting on their best friends and the quality of their friendships. The researchers also conducted interviews enquiring about the participants' feelings of anxiety, self-worth, and social acceptance. The team examined the teenagers for symptoms of depression and interviewed their friends, as well.

## Close friendships predict lower anxiety

High-quality dyadic friendships were described as friendships with a high degree of attachment and support, which allowed them to share intimate feelings.

Additionally, Narr and colleagues examined these teenagers' popularity, which was defined as how many school friends sought their company - that is, how many ranked them at the top of the list of peers they would like to spend time with.

**The scientists found that those adolescents who put close friendships first at the age of 15 tended to have lower social anxiety, a higher sense of self-worth, and fewer depressive symptoms by the age of 25, compared with their counterparts who did not prioritize such friendships.**

Interestingly, those considered highly popular during their teenage years reported greater feelings of social anxiety as adults. "Our research found that the quality of friendships during adolescence may directly predict aspects of long-term mental and emotional health," says Narr.

As this is an observational study, it cannot explain causality. However, the authors venture some possible explanations. One potential reason for these long-term benefits could be that close, positive relations with friends boost self-worth and self-esteem at a time crucial for self-development and identity formation.

It could also be the case, the authors suggest, that starting off with close friendships in life sets the ground for more positive, supportive relationships throughout the rest of one's life.

"Our study affirms that forming strong close friendships is likely one of the most critical pieces of the teenage social experience," says study co-author Joseph Allen, who is the Hugh P. Kelly Professor of Psychology at UV.

**"Being well-liked by a large group of people cannot take the place of forging deep, supportive friendships," Prof. Allen adds. "And these experiences stay with us, over and above what happens later."**

"As technology makes it increasingly easy to build a social network of superficial friends, focusing time and attention on cultivating close connections with a few individuals should be a priority."