

# Social Rejection in The Development of Mood Disorder

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## ABSTRACT

Mood disorders, a class of serious mental illnesses, are often the outcome of social rejection, a situation in which an individual is deliberately excluded from a social interaction, relationship, or event (DeWall & Bushman, 2011). While those who experience social rejection may try to disregard their reaction (e.g., embarrassment), some of the long-term impacts can have unintended consequences and effects on a person's health. The present work aims to review the effects of social rejection and how it is connected to the development of mood disorders, specifically depression and bipolar disorder. A better understanding of how social rejection leads to the development of mood disorders is important for assisting those who may have experienced social rejection with coping in adaptive ways that lessen the likelihood of mood disorder development.

## Mood Disorders

Mood disorders, a class of serious mental illnesses, are delineated in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V; Rus Makovec et al., 2021). Among the more commonly known mood disorders are unipolar or major depressive disorder and bipolar disorders, both characterized by significant changes in mood and emotional states (Ehnavall et al., 2014). Major depressive disorder (MDD), is characterized by prolonged and extended periods of grief or low mood, loss of pleasure in activities that may have previously brought joy, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, changes in sleep patterns, and thoughts of suicide. In contrast, bipolar disorder involves a shift between episodes of depressive thoughts similar to those observed in major depressive disorder and periods of mania or hypomania. During periods of mania or hypomania, an individual experiences heightened energy levels, increased levels of self-esteem, reduced need for sleep, and an increase in impulsive thoughts and behaviors that could be dangerous (Ehnavall et al., 2014).

Though similarities can be found between unipolar and bipolar disorder, a key difference is found in the episodes of mania for individuals with bipolar disorder in comparison to those with unipolar disorder. Recent research observed and characterized bipolar disorder with greater emotional reactivity and is further differentiated from MDD by an increased perception of pain and heightened sensitivity from rejection (Ehnavall et al., 2014). In contrast, individuals suffering from major depressive disorder tend to only encounter depressive episodes that contribute to their lack of feelings and emotional reactivity. Furthermore, MDD is associated with anhedonia, a reduced ability to experience pleasure in activities like socializing or enjoying a meal with family (Kumar et al., 2017).

Furthermore, mood disorders can evolve and potentially lead to more serious conditions if left untreated or unmanaged. For instance, some cases of untreated major depressive disorder may progress into more chronic and severe forms, known as treatment-resistant depression, which can be extremely challenging to manage, requiring more intensive treatment approaches (Little, 2009). Similarly, untreated bipolar disorder can escalate into mixed episodes, where individuals experience symptoms of both mania and depression simultaneously (Drancourt et al., 2013). This creates a dangerous environment with an increased risk of self-harm or

suicide. Additionally, substance abuse and other co-occurring mental health disorders may intensify mood disorder symptoms and contribute to a more complicated road for treatment.

## Social Connections

Humans have basic needs as defined by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Bassett, 2016). When individuals feel or get socially rejected, the isolation that usually comes out of rejection takes away four basic human needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. (Kumar et al., 2017) A lack of these needs negatively impacts an individual's mental health. As Maslow's hierarchy of needs portrays, an individual has different levels of needs that must be met before the next level can be built upon.

Humans evolved from the dependence on and assistance of others through social interaction and have become a basic human need (Eisenberger, 2012). If an individual lacks social connection with others, it could contribute to a variety of problems like different mood disorders. Losing social connection and inclusion in a social situation can create the same feeling as getting physically hurt.

## Social Rejection

Social rejection refers to the outcome of deliberate exclusion from a social interaction, relationship, or event, and it is considered a significant stressor for individuals. (DeWall & Bushman, 2011) This event can occur in a variety of situations, including exclusion from social gatherings, rejection in romantic relationships, or being left out by a group of friends. The outcome of social rejection is felt due to a need to belong, and the desire to build and maintain meaningful relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Being socially rejected or excluded can contribute to many future mental issues. Social acceptance occurs when other people wish to include an individual in social activities, gatherings, etc. (DeWall & Bushman, 2011). After experiencing social acceptance, individuals may feel rewarded and have a pleasant reaction to this acceptance. When comparing the two situations, social acceptance is generally seen as positive, contributing to feelings of belonging and self-worth, while social rejection is often perceived as negative, leading to the development of emotional distress and feelings of inadequacy.

Many researchers have connected social acceptance to a basic human need. This desire to belong and be accepted often alters the actions of a person in order for society to "accept" them. The human need for belongingness and acceptance is often met with rejection (Minihan et al., 2023). Since the feeling of being socially rejected is undesirable, individuals try to adapt themselves to avoid a negative state in which they do not receive the benefits of inclusion. (DeWall & Bushman, 2011) The difference in outcomes of social acceptance and rejection varies greatly due to the need to belong in social situations. The motivation to be "socially accepted" stems from the survival tactics of our evolutionary ancestors. Cooperative group living allowed early humans to share and receive resources from each other, making it unnecessary for individuals to carry the entire burden of their well-being on their own shoulders. Seeking acceptance had survival benefits for early humans. This gave them the incentive to avoid a negative state in which they would not receive the benefits of inclusion, which ultimately decreased their survival rate (DeWall & Bushman, 2011).

Moreover, individuals who consistently experience social rejection may become socially isolated as a coping mechanism or as a result of withdrawal from social interactions to avoid further rejection (Bassett, 2016). Social isolation can have detrimental effects on mental health, as humans are inherently social beings, and a lack of meaningful social connections can lead to feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Prolonged social isolation has been associated with various dangerous health problems, including cognitive decline, weakened immune function, and an increased risk of developing chronic health conditions.

## Social Rejection and Mood Disorders

The effects of social rejection on well-being can vary across individuals with mental health disorders, but social rejection is one of the strongest proximal risk factors in the development of mood disorders. Social rejection can serve as a potent trigger for the development of mood disorders due to its impact on emotional regulation and psychological resilience. The emotional distress caused by social rejection could potentially lead to the dysregulation of mood-related processes. A single encounter with social rejection can develop into a variety of different outcomes that change an individual's future experiences with social rejection and reaction toward social situations.

The link between social rejection and mood disorders becomes stronger when exploring how different mood disorders can influence the way individuals react to social rejection (Ehnvall et al., 2014). For instance, individuals with social anxiety disorder may be particularly sensitive to situations of rejection. Their pre-existing fears of negative evaluation could lead to a cycle of behaviors that further perpetuate their anxiety. Due to the trauma they may have from their first encounter with social rejection, they may be scared to interact with other people because of their fear of being rejected again. They may handle social rejection with fear and would be more sensitive to that rejection because of previously developed trauma (DeWall & Bushman, 2011). Similarly, individuals with depression may internalize social rejection, attributing it to their own perceived inadequacies, which can intensify their depressive symptoms and feelings of worthlessness.

The treatment of the outcomes of social rejection is crucial to the further experiences of an individual. If there is a lack of care, an individual may suffer from the long-term effects of social rejection. When a person experiencing emotional pain is inappropriately diagnosed, treated, or not treated at all, the effects they may be feeling from a mood disorder affected by social rejection can worsen and become a serious mental illness (Rus Makovec et al., 2021). This suffering will often lead to emotional scarring from social rejection and trigger a person to show anxiety, anger, sadness, depression, and jealousy, due to their trauma from a single situation (DeWall & Bushman, 2011).

## Social Rejection and Mood Disorders in Adolescence

While the majority of the research done on social rejection in relation to mood disorders is done in adults, most of the effects of social rejection on mood disorders occur in adolescence. Most emotional disorders (75%; Minihan et al., 2021) first appear during adolescence due to the heightened social rejection sensitivity during that age (Minihan et al., 2023). Social rejection in adolescence can occur in several situations that could shape the future of that child and how they handle social situations in adulthood. The development of a mood disorder during adolescence is associated with increased negative affect on social functioning and that will recur across the lifespan for many.

Researchers have observed how parenting styles may affect how social rejection contributes to the development of a mood disorder in adolescence. As a child, the presence of parental figures can change behavior and their childhood experiences, which shape the rest of their life and approaches to tough situations. Thus, parental rejection has been shown to contribute to an increasing rate of developing a mood disorder in adolescence (Akse et al., 2004). The rejection from parental figures has different effects on gender in developing depression and aggression in a developing brain. It has been noted that adolescents have a heightened risk for developing internalizing and externalizing problem behavior, such as depression and aggression respectively, when feeling rejected by their parents. Repetitively being rejected by parental figures creates the environment for children to evaluate themselves and their future negatively, making them vulnerable to depression (Nolan et al., 2003).

## **Social Rejection and Mood Disorders by Gender and Age**

### **Gender**

Though gender does not seem to play a significant role when researching and studying social rejection leading to the development of mood disorders, it can alter experiences with social rejection during adolescence. (Ehnvall et al., 2014) Girls are typically more sensitive to the perception of peer rejection and social exclusion and may take that experience personally, which contributes to a higher risk of females having depression when compared to their male peers (Schneider et al., 2016; Parry & Newton, 2001).

### **Age**

The age at which one experiences social rejection affects the duration of their side effects and if a mood disorder will develop. As previously mentioned, adolescence is a crucial point for the development of a mood disorder from social rejection and how that may have shaped future social experiences for that individual. When individuals experience social rejection from a young age, like adolescence, they carry that experience and situation with them throughout the rest of their lives. This can be a contributing factor to the statistic that 75% of mental health disorders evolve during adolescence, as previously mentioned (Minihan et al., 2021). In contrast, the older an individual becomes without having a mental health disorder, the less likely they are to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder as time progresses (Jones, 2013).

## **Discussion**

The present review discusses evidence for the connection between social rejection and mood disorders. Social rejection is strongly connected to the development of a mood disorder. A better understanding of how social rejection leads to the development of mood disorders is important for assisting those who may have experienced social rejection with coping in adaptive ways that lessen the likelihood of mood disorder development. Such research and analysis may help prevent and effectively treat future mood disorders.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

Most current research focuses on adults and their experiences with social rejection, with very few studies focusing on children and adolescents despite this being the age where many mood disorders develop. While it may be challenging to study how social rejection affects an individual during adolescence, this research will be crucial for the understanding of this connection between social rejection and mood disorders.

Additionally, the majority of the research that has covered mood disorders is on the most common mood disorders: major depressive disorder (unipolar) and bipolar disorder. There was a lack of variety and research among the less common mood disorders, including PTSD or a substance-induced mood disorder. While unipolar and bipolar may be more prevalent, these other disorders like a could be the outcome of social rejection and are important for future discussion.

## Conclusion

The present study demonstrates the connection between social rejection and mood disorders and how social rejection may contribute to the development of a mood disorder. The impact of social rejection on an individual's emotional well-being and subsequent mental health outcomes is significant. The degree to which the development of mood disorders is influenced by social rejection depends on outside factors like age and environment. Understanding the impact of social rejection on mental health outcomes in combination with studies directly assessing the effects of social rejection will aid in the awareness and prevention of mood disorder progression, regardless of an individual's previous experiences. Because social rejection occurs in everyday life, research on the topic and its long-term effects are crucial to aiding people in coping with social pain.

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