

Turbulent Teen Years Linked to Adult Unemployment

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Negative emotional experiences during our teen years may take a toll on our ability to land a job as adults, according to a new study.

Psychological scientists Mark Egan, Michael Daly, and Liam Delaney of the University of Stirling examined employment patterns for over 7,000 Americans born between 1980 and 1984. Their analysis revealed that early life emotional distress – feeling anxious or depressed as a teen – was a major risk factor for unemployment in adulthood.

Highly distressed adolescents were 32% more likely to be unemployed as adults and experienced 11 weeks (28%) more unemployment compared to their non-distressed peers. Overall, the negative impact of high levels of distress during adolescence was “similar to a one standard deviation decrease in intelligence, and double the magnitude of having a serious physical health problem,” Egan, Daly, and Delaney explain.

“These findings provide strong evidence of the unemployment penalty of early-life psychological distress and suggest that this relationship may be intensified during economic recessions. Investing in mental health in early life may be an effective way to reduce unemployment,” the researchers write.

Data was also collected from participants’ siblings as a way of controlling for family-level factors that might influence distress or unemployment. For example, siblings that both grow up in the same household share risk factors such as living in a high-crime neighborhood or having parents with mental health or substance abuse problems. A comparison between distressed adolescents and their non-distressed siblings provided further evidence that early experiences of emotional trials are linked to future employment woes.

Participants were interviewed in person or via telephone every year beginning in 1997. During these interviews, participants’ mental health was evaluated using a short 5-item inventory which has been

validated for predicting depression and anxiety disorders in adolescents. Participants were also asked to provide detailed weekly employment histories covering the period from January 2000 to December 2011.

There was a strong relationship between experiences of anxiety and depression in adolescence and prolonged periods of unemployment later in life. This negative trend grew even worse during the years of the Great Recession (2007-2009). Highly-distressed teens were 60% more likely to lose or leave their jobs in the years after the recession compared to those who had reported low distress in their teen years.

In [previous research](#) looking at lifetime unemployment among British birth cohorts, Egan, Daly, and Delaney found that childhood personality traits such as self-control could also be used to predict adult unemployment. It's unclear exactly why early psychological distress is linked to lower employment later in life but the researchers propose that turmoil during the school years may interfere with people's educational attainment, which in turn harms future employment opportunities.

"First, while there is abundant evidence that unemployment can worsen mental health, this study provides evidence in the other direction, by using a mental health measure elicited before the cohort members had been exposed to prolonged unemployment," Egan, Daly, and Delaney explain.

One of the important implications of this research is that anxiety and depression, even early in life, can take an enormous professional and economic toll across a person's lifetime.

Interventions that target symptoms of anxiety and depression early in life may have the potential for large national-scale economic returns by helping people avoid unemployment.

"The sizeable effect of distress on unemployment identified here is in keeping with a broader literature showing that poor mental health in early life predicts worse socioeconomic outcomes in areas such as employment, education and earnings, with greater relative penalties than the cost of early physical health problems," the researchers conclude.

References

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