How do children respond to parental low mood?

Background

• Parental depression is a well-established risk factor for childhood depression.

• Children’s responses to parental low mood could represent a key risk mechanism behind the intergenerational transmission of depression as they are likely to be associated with their own psychological well-being (e.g. Achenbach, 1991).

• Aimed to document children’s responses to their parents’ low mood in a large community sample.
Hypotheses

1) Children from a normal population do respond to their parents’ moods.

2) There will be gender differences, as these are found throughout the literature on adolescents and depressive symptoms.

3) Response patterns will be related to the children’s own mental distress, including externalising, internalising and depressive symptoms.

4) Children’s response patterns will relate to the level of parental depressive symptoms.
Method

Participants:

- 990 Finnish children (502 boys and 488 girls). Mean age = 12.6 years.
- 843 mothers and 573 fathers.
- The children completed the questionnaires during school classes and delivered the parental questionnaires to their parents.
Method

Measures:

• The children’s responses to their parents’ low mood were elicited in two questions:
  1) “All people, including parents, get down and feel wretched at times. If your father/mother is feeling down, what do you do?”
  2) “And how do you feel, if your mother/father is feeling down?”


• Parental depressive symptoms: General Health Questionnaire-28 (Goldberg, 1972; Goldberg and Hiller, 1979).
Findings

• Cluster analysis identified four underlying response patterns:
  1) Indifference
  2) Active Empathy
  3) Emotional Overinvolvement
  4) Avoidance

• The Active Empathy and Emotional Overinvolvement patterns reflect involvement in parental moods, and the Indifference and Avoidance patterns reflect non-involvement (detachment).

• All four response patterns were related to child mental health but not to levels of parental depressive symptoms.
Findings

- Children in the Emotional Overinvolvement and Avoidance groups showed high levels of mental distress, whereas children in the Active Empathy and Indifference groups were low on psychiatric symptoms.

- There were some systematic differences between boys and girls. However, feelings of guilt and anger, and feeling down themselves were equally common in the boys and the girls.

- The children’s responses to their mothers and fathers also differed.
Limitations

- Limited generalisability?

- Only cross-sectional associations able to be drawn.

- Limited conclusions?

- Nonetheless, the large sample and the robustness of the separate clusterings suggest that this line of investigation needs much more attention.
Implications

• A more comprehensive picture is needed.

• Implications for treatment and preventive interventions for childhood depression.

• Could explain the considerable variation that exists in outcomes for children with depressed parents.
The End