

Summary: Do parental divorce and adult attachment style contribute independently to depressive symptoms and stress levels in adulthood?

Emma-leigh E. Doerksen

Previous research has found that people whose parents divorced during their childhood are more likely to have problems with their mental health in adulthood. Some of these problems include symptoms of depression and higher levels of stress. Attachment security refers to the general expectations that one is worthy of love, and that other people are caring and reliable. These expectations develop in early childhood from having strong, loving bonds with parents or caregivers. Attachment insecurity often results from inconsistent, unsupportive caregiving during childhood, and has been linked with having higher stress levels and more depressive symptoms in adulthood. This study aimed to find out whether parental divorce and adult attachment security were related to one another, and whether they were related to levels of both depressive symptoms and stress.

Participants in this study were all Brandon University students enrolled in the introductory psychology courses. It was expected that people with divorced parents would tend to also have more depressive symptoms and higher stress levels. It was also expected that people with low attachment security would tend to have higher stress levels and depressive symptoms. These predictions were tested by comparing participants' responses to four different surveys, each measuring one of the four study variables: parental divorce, attachment security, depressive symptoms, and stress.

Comparing responses to all of the surveys showed that people who had parents who divorced or separated were not any more likely to have low attachment security, more depressive symptoms or high stress levels. However, those with lower attachment security were more likely

to have more depressive symptoms and higher stress levels. Another data analysis showed similar results – parental divorce did not predict either stress levels or depressive symptoms, and attachment insecurity predicted both of these outcomes.

There were some limitations to this study. Firstly, measuring parental divorce only as a “yes or no” question did not take into account the diverse experiences of participants. This may have affected the results. Having a sample of only Brandon University students also means that the results cannot be used to make predictions about other groups of people. Using self-report surveys and conducting the study online also raises questions about the honesty of participants’ responses.

The previous research does not seem to include any studies which investigate how both parental divorce and attachment security may influence mental health. The results of this study are therefore important, as they suggest that adult attachment security is more strongly related to both depressive symptoms and stress than is parental divorce. These results are also important for guiding future research on these topics. For example, a more complete measure of the experience of parental divorce should be used in future research, to more fully understand how parental divorce may influence mental health outcomes in adulthood.