

## Negative Emotions Are Contagious in Families

Some research is finding what many family members know from experience – that emotions can be transmitted from one family member to another. Unfortunately, the most contagious emotions appear to be the negative ones, such as anger, anxiety and depression. These feelings tend to have longer lasting effects than do positive feelings. Negative emotions on the part of parents can have a toxic effect on the family.

Children are more susceptible to catching negative emotions from parents than parents are from children, and women are more susceptible than are men. Childhood depression is often related to parents' negative emotions. Distressed parents tend to have distressed children.

Negative emotion in one parent may be transmitted to another parent, which may exacerbate results for children. These second hand emotions may be harmful for families somewhat like second hand smoke. Distressed parents tend to view children's behaviors more negatively, have greater difficulty remembering constructive parenting strategies, and are more likely to use punitive parenting responses, than parents who are not distressed.

When a reason for the negative emotion is known by family members, they are more likely give each other some slack. For example, a child may answer a harsh parental criticism by saying, "I know that anger is due to your back pain and not to my forgetting to put the milk away, so I won't get angry back." In these situations, negative emotions are less likely to be contagious.

Larger family size, marital stress, work stress, and having an adolescent are associated with greater likelihood of spillover of tension and negative emotion in the family. Since knowing the reasons for negative emotions reduces their contagiousness, the research supports the value of good communication about feelings of distress in families, when appropriate. The research supports the value of parents trying to compensate for a bad day at work by having positive encounters with children and spouse at home.

Source: Comeau, J. (2000). Parenting and family relationships studied via transmission of emotions. *Parenting Education Practitioners Talk*, 6, 6.  
(Summarized by Rachel (Martin) Ozretich)