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Good parent-children relationships can prevent future anxiety disorders

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An international study coordinated by Jordi Alonso, manager of the health care services research group at the Municipal Institute of Medical Research (IMIM-Hospital del Mar) has revealed that different types of anxiety disorders suffered by adults are associated with lack of care or excessively protective maternal behaviour during the early lives of their children.

Anxiety disorders are calculated to affect 15-20% of the world population. Even when biological and genetic risk factors have been established, psychological factors also play a basic role in their development. Among these factors are those related to bonding established between parents and children during childhood. The tool that evaluates the quality of the bonding that takes place and relates it to the development of specific disorders is the study variable that has been systematized as a PBI index (Parental Bonding Instrument). Previous studies have already employed the PBI to evaluate adult depression, although few studies have related it to anxiety.

According to Jordi Alonso *'the main objective of this work has been to study the association that exists between the parental care received during childhood, particularly the attention received, overprotection and authoritarianism, and the appearance in adults of specific anxiety disorders, such as generalised anxiety crises and some specific types of phobias, such as for example social phobia and agoraphobia'*. The study has also **sought to determine if this association changes depending on the countries of origin of the people under study and if cultural factors can play a role in results.**

The study has been carried out thanks to the collaboration of 8232 participants in ESEMeD (The European Study of the Epidemiology of Mental Disorders), from Germany, Belgium, France, Holland, Italy and Spain. Participants were interviewed in their homes using the WMH-CIDI questionnaire (Composite International Diagnostic Interview), which measures the most common mental disorders. Subjective perception about the affective relationship with their parents from childhood to adolescence, or the first 16 years of life, was measured using the PBI (Parental Bonding Instrument), which considers the care received, overprotection and authority.

Even though the methodology employed in this study does not allow a causal relationship to be established, the results have primarily shown that **lack of care from the mother is related to all types of anxiety disorders considered** and that, even so, the opposite effect, **excessive maternal overprotection** -not significant if paternal- **would be fundamentally associated with all the different pathologies related to anxiety.**

These discoveries are consistent and homogeneous for all participants, independently of their country of origin, finding in all cases that the lack of child care and maternal overprotection entail a psychosocial vulnerability factor for future adults. For this reason, knowing about these factors can help establish measures aimed at the most sensitive populations, as well as designing social and political strategies that let the fundamental role of family support be positively reinforced and taught in children's development.

Reference: Heider D, Matschinger H, Bernert S, Alonso J, Brugha TS, De Girolamo G, et al. 'Adverse parenting as a risk factor in the occurrence of anxiety disorders: a study in six European countries' *Soc Psychiatry Psychiat. Epidemiol.* 2008 Apr 43(4):266-72. Epub 2008 Jan 14.

About the ESEMeD project

The ESEMeD Project, coordinated by Jordi Alonso, was started in 2000 with the aim of measuring the prevalence of emotional disorders and anxiety disorders, of evaluating the quality of life and associated level of disability and establishing the basic indicators of medical care and treatment standards for the general population. For this reason, the frequency and impact on quality of life is evaluated for a wide range of mental illnesses, using the same methodology in the population groups of six European countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Holland and Spain.

About IMIM-Hospital del Mar

IMIM-Hospital del Mar is a public research institute, established 60 years ago by the Barcelona City Council and devoted to scientific research in the fields of biomedicine and health sciences, as well as training highly-qualified personnel in these areas. It is organised into five research programmes: cancer, neuropsychopharmacology, epidemiology and public health, inflammatory and cardiovascular processes and biomedical IT. Management: Miguel López-Botet.
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