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The Prevalence of Separation Anxiety in Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The present study examined whether parental intrusiveness played a role in undergraduate students experiencing separation anxiety while attending college. One-hundred and nine participants responded to a 6-question survey. Investigating how undergraduate students were raised by their parents is crucial because certain parenting styles may increase the likelihood of young adults developing separation anxiety. There was a significant difference between males and females on overprotectiveness from their parents, whereas females reported a higher frequency. Further studies in this area may assist in understanding how parenting style can influence susceptibility to separation anxiety.

The Prevalence of Separation Anxiety in Undergraduate Students

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Nearly every single human being within their lifetime will experience some form of anxiety. Whether this anxiety originates from tests taken in school, demands in the workplace, or raising children, anxiety is very much a part of life. In fact, lifetime prevalence estimates of anxiety disorders in adults within the general population are around 6.6% (Shear, Jin, Ruscio, Walters, & Kessler, 2006). This means that over 20,000,000 adults suffer from some type of anxiety disorder in the United States alone. The present study examined one of the more common types of anxiety disorders known as separation anxiety. This separation anxiety experienced in childhood may carry into adulthood when separation anxiety symptoms persist. Adult separation anxiety disorder is characterized by an excessive fear of physical or emotional separation from close attachment figures or environment, usually the home (Kirsten, Grenyer, Wagner, & Manicavasagar, 2008). Therefore, this study further examined if parental intrusiveness played a significant role in young adults in college experiencing separation anxiety.

Method

Participants were Boise State University students enrolled in general psychology courses. There were a total of 118 participants in this study. The average age of the participants was 20.84 ($SD = 6.04$), with 18 being the youngest and 55 being the oldest. Of those reporting

age, 81.5% were in the age range of 18 to 22, 15.7% in the age range of 23 to 35, and 3.6% in the age range of 36 to 60. Each participant was given the same survey. The six questions presented by this study were part of a larger omnibus survey containing 234 total questions. Participants were given course credit toward fulfilling a research requirement after taking the survey.

Results

There was a significant difference between males ($M = 1.19$, $SD = 0.92$) and females ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 0.95$) on parental over-protectiveness scores (POPS) question "My parents were very overprotective of me growing up," $t(104) = 2.74$, $p < .05$. Female students reported a higher frequency in over-protectiveness from parents than males did. In addition, there was not a significant difference between males ($M = 0.35$, $SD = 0.60$) and females ($M = 0.26$, $SD = 0.52$) on POPS question "Being away from my parents at college has given me anxiety," $t(101) = -0.77$, n.s. Also, there was not a significant difference between freshmen ($M = 0.21$, $SD = 0.44$), sophomores ($M = 0.50$, $SD = 0.72$), juniors ($M = 0.60$, $SD = 0.89$), and seniors ($M = 0.50$, $SD = 0.71$) on POPS question "Being away from my parents at college has given me anxiety," $F(3,99) = 2.34$, n.s.

Abstract

The present study examined whether parental intrusiveness played a role in undergraduate students experiencing separation anxiety while attending college. One-hundred and nine participants responded to a 6-question survey. Investigating how undergraduate students were raised by their parents is crucial because certain parenting styles may increase the likelihood of young adults developing separation anxiety. There was a significant difference between males and females on over-protectiveness from their parents, whereas females reported a higher frequency. Further studies in this area may assist in understanding how parenting style can influence susceptibility to separation anxiety.

Discussion

A small percentage of college students experience symptoms of separation anxiety. The over-protectiveness projected onto a child from parental figures may lead to separation anxiety in adulthood. This type of parenting may be linked to young college students experiencing separation anxiety while being away from parental figures. Even though most university students in this study did not report feelings of separation anxiety while attending college, separation anxiety still does exist among a minority of college students. The question that generated a significant difference between males and females was "My parents were very overprotective of me growing up." Females reported a higher frequency than males of parental over-protectiveness. This means that parents consider female children to be more vulnerable and require increased protection than male children. Significant differences did not exist across grade levels in regards to feeling separation anxiety while attending college. This infers that if a college student does not report feelings of separation anxiety as a freshman, then he or she will not report feelings of separation anxiety as a senior. In future studies, it may be beneficial to ask a greater amount of questions focused more specifically on anxiety in college students.