The relationship between levels of self-esteem and the development of depression in young adults with mild depressive symptoms

Yoobin Choi¹, Soo-Hee Choi¹, Je-Yeon Yun^{2,3}, Jae-A Lim¹, Yoonhee Kwon⁴, Hwa Young Lee⁴, Joon Hwan Jang^{4,5,*}

¹ Department of Psychiatry, Seoul National University Hospital, Seoul, Republic of Korea.
² Seoul National University Hospital, Seoul, Republic of Korea.
³ Yeongeon Student Support Center, Seoul National University College of Medicine, Seoul, Republic of Korea.
⁴ Department of Psychiatry, Seoul National University Health Service Center, Seoul, Republic of Korea.
⁵ Department of Medicine, Seoul National University College of Medicine, Seoul, Republic of Korea.

Introduction

Self-esteem is defined as “a certain attitude and a perception of one’s self”, which affects interactions and feelings towards oneself and others. Little is known about the relationship between levels of self-esteem and the development of depression in young adults. The present study investigated the relationship between self-esteem and depression to determine whether self-esteem levels are a risk factor for the development of depression in young adults.

Method

This study was conducted with 113 college students aged 19 to 35 (Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) n=44, Mild Depressive Symptoms (MDS) n=37, Healthy Control n=32). The levels of clinical symptoms, self-esteem, resilience, social support, and quality of life, as well as personality traits, were assessed (by Patient Health Questionnaire-9(PHQ-9), Generalized Anxiety Disease-7(GAD-7), State-Trait Anxiety Inventory-S(STAI-S), Resilience Appraisal Scale(RAS), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale(RSES), Quality of Life, and NEO-Personality Inventory (NEO-PI)).

Results

There was no significant difference between the three groups in terms of sex and age. However, there were significant differences between the three groups in all clinical variable scores (p<0.01 for all variables) (Table 1).

Table 1. The demographic and clinical characteristics

	CON (N=44)	MDS (N=37)	MDD (N=32)	Statistics p
Sex (female/ male)	27/17	22/15	19/13	0.980
Age (yrs)	24.34±3.38	24.78±3.49	24.38±3.57	0.827
PHQ-9	3.50±5.05	7.73±3.77	10.38±2.51	<0.001**
GAD-7	3.23±2.72	5.92±4.72	8.19±4.53	<0.001**
STAI-S	45.18±8.91	53.54±8.83	57.59±8.05	<0.001**
RAS	44.14±7.55	37.03±5.81	35.36±8.81	<0.001**
RSES	30.23±5.18	25.68±4.61	25.56±4.35	<0.001**
Social Support	97.07±13.04	88.22±16.07	85.88±11.44	0.001*

* P <0.05. ** P <0.001.

The MDS group with high self-esteem reported having the lowest levels of social support, resilience, agreeableness and extraversion compared to those of the MDD group and control group with high self-esteem. In contrast, the MDS group with low self-esteem showed no differences in social support, resilience, agreeableness and openness according to the NEO-PI scale (Table 2).

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that a lack of social support may decrease resilience and lead to depression in young adults with high self-esteem. Early intervention for depression in young adults needs to focus on improving their levels of social support, resilience, and positive domains of personality.

Table 2. The mean scores and standard deviations of all clinical variables according to the level of self-esteem

	CON		MDS		MDD		Statistics	
	HIGH (N=27)	LOW (N=17)	HIGH (N=11)	LOW (N=26)	HIGH (N=10)	LOW (N=22)	HIGH	LOW
	M±SD						p	
PHQ-9	2.78±2.34	4.65±2.40	5.09±3.75	8.85±3.23	8.00±3.86	11.46±5.23	<0.001**	<0.001**
GAD-7	2.41±2.39	4.53±2.76	3.82±3.97	6.81±4.79	6.30±3.65	9.05±4.70	0.005*	0.008*
STAI-S	41.70±8.77	50.71±5.97	49.46±7.99	55.27±8.74	52.90±6.94	59.73±7.73	0.001*	0.003*
RAS	46.93±6.53	39.71±7.06	38.91±6.12	36.23±5.61	42.60±8.21	32.07±7.02	0.006*	0.002*
Social Support	100.82±12.74	91.12±11.49	86.36±17.71	89.00±15.63	87.50±9.58	85.14±12.33	0.004*	0.374
QOL Total	85.87±12.12	73.00±9.29	74.82±11.57	69.08±12.36	68.60±8.02	58.68±9.82	<0.001**	<0.001**
NEO Agreeableness	40.93±5.04	40.35±4.57	36.18±4.42	38.62±6.14	39.85±5.28	33.59±5.29	0.036*	0.001*
NEO Conscientiousness	40.70±8.09	38.00±7.25	37.82±6.62	34.62±6.38	38.20±7.51	31.32±8.36	0.482	0.023*
NEO Extraversion	40.04±5.74	36.29±6.44	32.64±5.45	35.23±8.24	37.20±8.30	32.82±7.43	0.007*	0.329
NEO Neuroticism	33.26±7.52	42.00±6.96	39.18±7.28	43.81±7.96	44.40±4.25	47.64±5.48	<0.001**	0.038*
NEO Openness	41.56±6.70	41.88±5.21	44.82±8.08	42.46±7.20	45.40±6.00	39.86±6.12	0.219	0.356

* P <0.05. ** P <0.001.

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