

How adult children with problems affect parents' well-being

16 October 2015, by Diane Swanbrow



You did everything you could to raise them right and keep them safe, but their lives aren't turning out the way you'd planned. Maybe they're drinking too much. Or they're heading for divorce. Or they can't seem to manage their money. Or maybe they've been diagnosed with a serious illness.

When [adult children](#) aren't doing well, it can have a big effect on [parents'](#) lives. Now, a University of Michigan study provides details about exactly how parents are affected.

"We found that the type of problems adult children have make a difference," said Kira Birditt, a researcher at the U-M Institute for Social Research. "And we also found that when adult children have problems, parents have more negative encounters with them, but they have just as many positive interactions."

Birditt and colleagues conducted a daily diary study of 197 middle-aged parents who reported their interactions with adult children for seven consecutive days. The parents also provided saliva samples at different times during the study, allowing the research team to assess daily

fluctuations in cortisol levels—a widely used marker of stress.

More than 60 percent of the parents reported having at least one adult child with a problem, and 34 percent reported that all of their adult children had at least one problem.

Two types of problems were examined in the study: physical-emotional problems (physical and [mental health problems](#) and developmental disabilities) and lifestyle-behavioral problems (financial trouble, drug and alcohol abuse, trouble with the law and serious relationship trouble, such as divorce).

"We found that interactions with adult children who had physical or emotional problems had more immediate, same-day associations with cortisol whereas interactions with adult children with lifestyle or behavioral problems resulted in more delayed, or next day, associations," Birditt said.

The findings have implications for parents trying to manage their distress.

"Parents with adult children who have lifestyle and [behavioral problems](#) may want to focus on learning effective coping strategies for reducing stress they already have. In contrast, parents of adult children with physical and [emotional problems](#) may spend more time anticipating problems and may benefit from strategies to help prevent stress."

Another way for parents to reduce the stress of [negative interactions](#) with children who have problems is to attempt to balance these interactions with positive encounters, which buffer the harmful effects.

"If you have a conversation that makes you feel irritated, hurt or annoyed, try to follow it with one that makes you feel good," Birditt said.

Even in the midst of conflict and worry, these

positive [interactions](#) are not only possible, but their helpful effect may be particularly important, she said.

More information: Kira S. Birditt et al. Daily Interactions in the Parent-Adult Child Tie: Links between Children's Problems and Parents' Diurnal Cortisol Rhythms, *Psychoneuroendocrinology* (2015). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psyneuen.2015.09.027](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2015.09.027)

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