

# Public health study finds stress over gender roles linked to maladjustment in girls

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Credit: Georgia State University

Stress over not conforming to feminine gender roles could make adolescent girls more vulnerable to substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, mood disorders and feelings of hopelessness, according to a study led by an instructor at the School of Public Health at Georgia State University.

"This [stress](#) can be an impetus for mood disorder symptoms such as depression and anxiety," the study's researchers said in their report.

"Additionally, it may drive negative coping behaviors or attempts to demonstrate their feminine conformity through maladaptive behaviors."

To measure the relationship between the stress and negative physical and mental health outcomes, a team of researchers collected and analyzed data from 643 female middle and [high school students](#) in Michigan who completed questionnaires. The results were published in *Child Psychiatry and Human Development* in the article "Feminine Discrepancy Stress and Psychosocial Maladjustment Among Adolescent Girls." The study's lead author is Dr. Dennis E. Reidy, a

behavioral scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Center for Injury Prevention & Control and instructor at Georgia State.

The researchers noted that discrepancy stress, which stems from fear of the consequences for not conforming to [traditional gender roles](#), has been shown to have adverse effects including risky sexual and violent behaviors.

"However, evidence of these effects has been limited to men and boys, neglecting the impact gender role discrepancy and discrepancy stress may have on girls," they said.

The more girls reported feeling stress over being perceived as not conforming to feminine gender roles, the more they also reported signs of [psychosocial maladjustment](#), according to the study.

The researchers suggested that strategies promoting acceptance of gender fluidity and sexuality within schools may promote an environment tolerant of nonconformity that could then lessen stress about the need to adhere to gender norms.

"This point is critical as it could likely reduce the likelihood of social and physical victimization by peers, which in turn, would reduce much of the trauma that contributes most strongly to maladjustment," the authors said.

The researchers also noted that while [gender roles](#) are related to sexuality, the two are not equivalent. Gender roles are made up of many attributes, of which sexuality is only one.

**More information:** Dennis E. Reidy et al. Feminine Discrepancy Stress and Psychosocial Maladjustment Among Adolescent Girls, *Child Psychiatry & Human Development* (2017). [DOI:](#)

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