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Link seen between teen depression, listening to music

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By Pohla Smith, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Teenagers who listen to music more than other adolescents do are much more likely to have major depression, and teenagers who spend more time reading are less likely to be so diagnosed than other teen readers, according to a University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine study.

The study, released today, was published in the journal Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine. Lead author was Brian Primack, assistant professor of medicine and pediatrics in the med school.

"There really are two separate findings," Dr. Primack said of the study of 106 adolescents, 46 of whom had diagnoses of major depressive disorder.

In one finding, the top quarter of teens exposed to the most music were 8.3 times more likely to be depressed compared to the adolescents in the bottom quarter of the music-exposed group.

In the other, the top quarter of adolescents who were reading -- primarily books, but also magazines and newspapers -- were one-tenth as likely to be depressed as those in the quarter reading the least.

The researchers also expected results similar to the music findings with television and were surprised not to get them.

"We thought with depression, people might be more likely to reach out to more passive media forms such as television and music as opposed to more active media such as reading," Dr. Primack said. The reason is that reading requires someone to use the frontal lobe portion of the brain and be an "active participant" in the activity.

"The results were consistent with that in that people who read lots of books were less likely to be depressed," he said. "However, the music results were much more dramatic than anything we saw with television."

Because the researchers knew in advance which of 106 participants were depressed, they could not determine whether the listening to the music or the depression came first, Dr. Primack said. But, he said, "for this study, we probably would lean more to the latter interpretation."

"It seems more likely people who are depressed may seek out comfort through listening to certain types of music," he said. "They may be just listening to have something to keep them company if they don't feel like being around other people or some other reason."

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