Living Alone Linked to Increased Risk of Depression

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Young people may look forward to being on their own, but recent research suggests that the reality of a solitary lifestyle may be a lot less enjoyable than many believe. The risk of depression is almost 80 percent higher for those living alone than for those living with others, according to a Finnish Institute of Occupational Health study published in BMC Public Health and reported by ScienceDaily.

For the study, researchers followed 3,500 live-alone, working-age Finnish adults for seven years. Scientists measured depression by whether participants purchased antidepressants during the study period and whether various potential contributing factors, such as heavy drinking, smoking and lack of exercise, were associated.

Researchers found a number of factors connected to participants' increased risk of depression. For men living alone, these factors included heavy drinking, an unpleasant work environment or lack of social support at work or in their personal lives. Among women living alone, increased depression risk was largely linked to socioeconomic issues, such as poor housing conditions, low income or a lack of education. (Overall, risk of depression wasn't influenced by gender.)

But among both men and women who lived alone, more than half of the increased risk of depression remained unexplained. Researchers suggested this increase might be connected to internal issues, such as feelings of isolation and distrust, key life events accumulated over time and childhood experiences resulting in psychological effects as adults.

In addition, the study's assessment of an 80 percent increase in depression among those who live alone might be inaccurate. "This kind of study usually underestimates risk because the people who are at the most risk tend to be the people who are least likely to complete the follow up," said Laura Pulkki-Råback, PsyD, of the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, and the study's lead author. "We also were not able to judge how common untreated depression was."

Today, as many as one in three people in the United States and the United Kingdom live by themselves—a number that's doubled since the early '80s.

So if you live alone, keep an eye on your mood. And if you're feeling isolated, don't hesitate to seek help!

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