

Adulthood Development of the Gender Gap in Depression: Age-Specific Changes and Trends*

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Does the difference in depression between women and men grow in adulthood? Previous studies find that the cross-sectional difference increases in successive adult age groups well into late middle age and perhaps beyond. This happens because the u-shaped curve relating depression to age drops faster and longer for men, giving the appearance that the emotional benefits of adulthood accrue more to men than to women. However, the cross-sectional differences blend between-cohort trends with the within-cohort trajectories, perhaps giving a distorted picture. If those trends differ for women and men they can alter the pattern of cross-sectional differences. A stronger trend toward lower age-specific levels of depression for women than for men could produce the observed cross-sectional pattern in the absence of any adulthood growth in the gender gap.

This study uses 3-wave data from two national U.S. surveys taken at the end of the 20th Century.

Vector graphs based on growth-curve models show that depression does drop faster and longer in adulthood for men than for women. Synthetic cohort projections based on the observed changes imply that the gender gap increases in adulthood more than was evident from the earlier cross-sectional analyses.

Apparently the late-middle-age cohorts have higher age-specific levels of depression than the older and younger cohorts, with the trend more marked for women than for men. We discuss the possibility that the historic transformation of work and family roles may have created an adaptation burden for those in late middle-age near the end of the century, raising their age-specific levels of depression throughout adulthood.

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