



Depression and Derailment: A Cyclical Model of Mental Illness and Perceived Identity Change

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SUMMARY

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The researchers examined the reciprocity between depressive systems and derailment in a four-wave longitudinal study with college students over one academic year. Derailment is a relatively new construct that indexes perceived changes in identity and self-direction. It is related to internalizing symptoms regardless of the valence of perceived change. A highly derailed individual may fail to connect their past with their current direction and journey. The disconnect is theorized to contribute to a sense of instability, perceived life disruption, and the belief that who one is today differs substantially from who they were in the past.

Derailment is positively correlated to concurrent depressive symptoms, stress, and anxiety; in addition, derailment has long-term

predictive utility. Depression will relate to subsequent derailment because each symptom of depression can inspire the perceived identity change in some way.

Identity development, although a lifelong process, is at its peak during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Emerging adults are increasingly concerned with their future roles, directions, and drives as one's life course and purpose begins to take shape. Therefore, college students from a northeastern U.S. university were recruited. 939 students participated, a majority of them female and freshmen. The students were evaluated using the Beck Depression Inventory-II and the Derailment Scale.

The results indicated that depression positively predicted subsequent derailment, suggesting that perceived disruptions in life course may occur in response to

elevated depressive symptoms. However, derailment negatively predicted subsequent depression. Overall, the researchers found that perceived instability of identity and self-direction relate to an increase in depressive symptoms.

1. Ratner, K., Mendle, J., Burrow, A.L., and Thoemmes, F. (2019). Depression and Derailment: A Cyclical Model of Mental Illness and Perceived Identity Change. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 1-19. doi.org/10.1177/2167702619829748