Introduction

- Rejection Sensitivity (RS) is a personality disposition in which individuals anxiously expect and readily perceive rejection in social situations (Downey & Feldman, 1996).
- RS is posited to arise from insecure attachment relationships where primary caregivers fail to adequately respond to emotional needs (Chang, McElhaney, Allen, Schad, & Marston, 2012).
- According to diathesis-stress models of depression, RS represents a cognitive-affective diathesis that creates a high risk for depressive symptoms when combined with interpersonal stressors (Change et al., 2012).
- Consistent with this idea, previous research has demonstrated that interpersonal stressors (e.g., low interpersonl support, high parental criticism, invalidation from friends and family) predict depressive symptoms primarily in adolescents who are high on RS (Change et al., 2012).
- The interplay between RS, interpersonal stressors, and depressive symptoms has yet to be investigated in young adults during the transition to university.
- This is an important research endeavor because young adulthood is considered a high-risk period for the onset of depression (Desio-Giraldi, Dugger, Porced, Cocchi, & McGorry, 2012).
- Moreover, the transition to university is characterized by numerous interpersonal stressors that may be experienced as particularly stressful for students high on RS, such as renegotiation of social roles, formation of new peer relationships, and potential separation from high school peers and parents (Perker, Hogan, Eabaebrook, Ole, & Wood, 2006).

Methods

Participants: 676 first-year undergraduate students (Mage = 18 years; 73% female).

Procedure: Participants completed self-report questionnaires measuring RS in the first month of their first semester of university, followed by monthly questionnaires measuring interpersonal stressors and depressive symptoms for seven months.

Measures:
- Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ): 18 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale, measuring rejection anxiety and perceived likelihood of rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996).
- College Chronic Life Stress Survey (CCLSS): 52 yes/no items measuring the number of stressors over the past thirty days. 23 interpersonal stressors were summed to create monthly interpersonal stressor scores (Flebow & Cohen, 1996).
- Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS-21): 21 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, measuring depression, anxiety, and stress over the past thirty days. 7 items from the depression subscale were used to measure depressive symptoms (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

Results

- A linear multilevel model revealed that RS significantly predicted higher overall depressive symptoms (β = 0.72, SE = 0.074, p < .001).
- Students had higher depressive symptoms when they encountered a greater number of interpersonal stressors than usual throughout the seven months (β = 0.50, SE = 0.06, p < .001).
- RS moderated the coupled change of interpersonal stressors and depressive symptoms over time, such that the relationship was stronger for students higher on RS (β = 0.22, SE = 0.016, p = .170).

Discussion

- Consistent with our first two hypotheses, the present study found that (1) RS was significantly related to higher depressive symptoms, and (2) there was a significant coupled relationship between interpersonal stressors and depressive symptoms.
- More specifically, students tended to have higher depressive symptoms when they experienced a greater number of interpersonal stressors than usual, such as conflict with friends and family, termination of a romantic relationship, and feeling like they don’t fit in.
- Inconsistent with our third hypothesis, RS did not significantly moderate the coupled relationship between interpersonal stressors and depressive symptoms over the first year of university.
- This is inconsistent with previous research implicating RS as a vulnerability factor that elevates the risk for depressive symptoms in response to interpersonal stressors (Change et al., 2012).
- Nevertheless, the results from this study identify students high on RS as vulnerable to depression during the transition to university, which has the potential to inform early and preventative interventions.
- Since RS is conceptualized as a relatively stable personality trait (Mardon, Harre, & Allen, 2010), an interesting avenue for future research would be to examine if it is possible to reduce RS and if this leads to increases in resilience or decreases in depressive symptoms.

References