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Exploring relationships between internalizing problems and risky sexual behavior: A twin study

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ABSTRACT: Previous research has linked risky sexual behavior (RSB) to externalizing problems (Ross et al., 2019; Clark et al, 2021) and to substance use (Huibregtse et al., 2020), but little research has been conducted on relationships between RSB and internalizing problems. Component measures of RSB—e.g., number of lifetime sexual partners and age at first sexual encounter—demonstrate heritability, as do internalizing problems. The current study examines relationships between RSB and internalizing problems, utilizing data from twins participating in the Center on Antisocial Drug Dependence. We first explore genetic and environmental influences on both number of lifetime sexual partners and age at first sexual encounter, as well as on depression, neuroticism, and self-esteem. We then examine relationships between RSB and internalizing problems via confirmatory factor analysis and bivariate Cholesky decomposition. Our research is relevant to understanding links between risky sexual behavior and mental health.

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