

Authors: Maria Gabriella Restifo Rita Desiderio Maria Grazia Sequino Gianfranco Buffardi
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Title: FEAR OF THE GENE. Existential consequences of the risk of genetic transmission in children of people affected by major psychiatric pathology

ABSTRACT

Children of people with psychiatric disorders (especially anxiety disorder, ADHD, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, alcohol and substance abuse, or depression) has a higher probability of acquiring psychiatric disorders in adulthood. Risk factors are added to this hereditary rate that facilitate the onset of the disorder. Epigenetics, in fact, by investigating phenotypic changes in the cell, provides insight into how environmental factors and factors outside the linear DNA sequence may affect the onset of the disorder in children of parents with psychiatric disorder. Factors such as stigma, economic difficulties, and the burden of caring for the ill parent have a relevance on the mental and physical well-being of the children.

Therefore, the negative effects of psychiatric disorders are not only limited to the person who is affected, but also extend to all family members and the social network from which the person comes. Being born and growing up with a parent with psychiatric symptomatology, particularly if one serves as a caregiver, can have a significant impact in terms of mental health, physical health, family and social environment, and existential prospects.

The consequences of such conditions affect not only development, but also social skills and the type and quality of relationships that children will establish throughout their lives.

Currently, the social context and professionals, particularly health professionals, often underestimate the impact of this condition on the experience and development of children within families with mental illness. Instead, understanding their inner world, fears and resources could help professionals and families to implement not only more specific treatments aimed at parents with psychiatric disorder, but also foster the normal development of these children and enhance protective factors that could contribute to it.

Approved by the Ethics Committee of Giustino Fortunato University (code 01/2024/psi-gb) and in collaboration with the School of NeoEsistential Psychotherapy (S.P.Es.) and Luigi Vanvitelli

University, the present study aims to investigate individual differences in the children of people diagnosed with psychiatric disorder and any difficulties and fears that may emerge in them, particularly in living with and taking care of the parent.

For this purpose, an ad hoc instrument was constructed and is being validated to assess the difficulties and inner experiences of children of parents with a psychiatric disorder.

Specifically, the study investigates the possibility that families caring for the parent with psychiatric disorder may show lower levels of physical and mental well-being than families in which the diagnoses examined are not present.