

# The Potential Emotional Support Burden in Adolescent Girls' Friendships: A Literature Review of Co-Rumination, Peer Emotion Work, and Mental Health Outcomes

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## ABSTRACT

Adolescent friendships are often viewed as protective sources of emotional support, especially during developmental periods when anxiety and depressive symptoms begin to increase. However, less attention has been given to the psychological experiences of adolescents who consistently provide this support. This literature review examines how emotional caregiving within adolescent girls' friendships may become psychologically demanding while still strengthening closeness. Using a narrative review approach, this paper synthesizes theoretical and empirical research on co-rumination, peer emotion work, gendered emotional socialization, empathetic distress, peer contagion, and internalizing symptoms. Existing research shows that co-rumination can increase friendship quality and intimacy while also being associated with anxiety, depression, and perceived stress. Research on peer emotion work further suggests that adolescent friendships may involve comforting others, managing distress, and remaining emotionally available, although the burden experienced by the support-provider remains under-researched. Gendered emotional expectations may make these patterns especially relevant for girls, whose friendships generally place greater emphasis on empathy, emotional disclosure, support, and relational maintenance. Research on empathetic distress and peer contagion also indicates that friends' distress and internalizing symptoms can become shared or intensified within close relationships. Overall, the literature suggests that emotional support is not inherently harmful, but it may become psychologically costly when it is chronic, one-sided, and centered on distress. Further research is needed to directly examine emotional exhaustion, boundary difficulties, and perceived responsibility among adolescent girls who regularly assume emotional caregiving roles.

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a major developmental period marked by identity formation, emotional growth, and increasing independence. Along with these developmental changes, adolescence is also a period in which

Sep 2026  
Vol 11, No 5.

many mental health difficulties begin to develop or become increasingly present. Anxiety disorders and depression are among the most common mental health conditions affecting adolescents, with anxiety disorders representing the most common category of mental disorder and rates of major depression increasing throughout adolescence (Merikangas et al., 2010; Avenevoli et al., 2015). These findings establish adolescence as an important period for understanding the development of internalizing disorders, which are conditions that mainly involve inward emotional distress, such as anxiety and depression. Research on adolescent mental health has also consistently revealed a gender difference in internalizing symptoms and disorders. Gender differences in depression were found to be relatively small earlier in development but began to emerge between the ages of thirteen and fifteen before becoming more pronounced later in adolescence (Hankin et al., 1998). One explanation for this difference is that biological, social, and psychological vulnerabilities that may already exist among girls interact with new challenges during adolescence, increasing their risk of depression (Nolen-Hoeksema and Girgus, 1994). More recent findings continue to support this pattern. In 2023, 20.1% of adolescent girls had a current diagnosis of anxiety compared with 12.3% of boys, while 10.9% of girls had a diagnosis of depression compared with 6.0% of boys (Sappenfield et al., 2024). Overall, this research establishes a continuing gender gap in adolescent mental health and shows that girls experience anxiety and depression at higher rates than boys. However, these findings also create questions about the social and emotional experiences that may contribute to this difference.

One possible area of influence is the growing importance of peer relationships during adolescence. Although relationships with parents continue to influence emotional development, adolescents increasingly turn toward close friends for support, intimacy, and opportunities to discuss personal experiences. Friendships during this stage become increasingly characterized by intimate conversations, responsiveness to one another's needs, and the disclosure of personal information (Berndt, 1982). This shows how friendships begin to move beyond relationships centered mainly on shared activities and become more focused on emotional closeness and mutual support. As a result, friendships become important places where adolescents discuss problems, express emotions, and develop their understanding of both themselves and others. Therefore, peer relationships can have a significant influence on adolescent emotional adjustment and mental health.

Due to the importance of peer relationships, social support is usually framed as a protective factor against psychological distress. The social support buffering hypothesis explains that the availability of supportive relationships can lessen the harmful psychological effects of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). When applied to adolescence, this theory suggests that close friendships may help protect adolescents by providing emotional support, understanding, and a sense of belonging during stressful experiences. However, the effects of peer relationships depend on the quality and type of interactions that take place within them. Positive qualities within best friendships have been associated with lower social anxiety, while relational victimization and negative friendship interactions have been connected to greater social anxiety and depressive symptoms (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). These findings suggest that friendships are not automatically beneficial simply because they involve closeness or support. Instead, peer relationships can

either protect or strain adolescent mental health depending on the interactions and emotional patterns within them.

Co-rumination provides one example of how a friendship can involve both positive and negative effects. Co-rumination refers to repeatedly discussing problems, returning to their possible causes and consequences, and continuing to focus on the negative emotions surrounding them (Rose, 2002). Although co-rumination is associated with close, high-quality friendships, it has also been connected to symptoms of anxiety and depression and is reported more frequently by girls than boys (Rose, 2002). Longitudinal research further demonstrates this contradiction, as co-rumination predicted increases in positive friendship quality among girls while also predicting increases in anxiety and depressive symptoms over time (Rose et al., 2007). Therefore, the same conversations that create emotional closeness and make adolescents feel supported may also cause negative emotions to be repeatedly discussed and reinforced.

Research on empathetic distress extends this contradiction by considering the possible emotional cost of becoming deeply involved in a friend's problems. This has been described as a "cost of caring," in which the ability to understand a friend's perspective is connected to both positive friendship quality and greater empathetic distress (Smith & Rose, 2011). Empathetic distress occurs when an individual begins to experience another person's emotional distress and problems as their own. These relationships were partly explained by co-rumination, suggesting that repeatedly discussing a friend's problems may contribute to both emotional closeness and emotional strain (Smith & Rose, 2011). More recent research found an indirect relationship in which gender was connected to later anxiety through co-rumination and empathetic distress, although this same pathway was not found for depressive symptoms (Capili et al., 2026). Together, these findings show that emotionally supportive interactions can have psychological costs and that these costs may be especially relevant to understanding anxiety among adolescent girls.

Despite growing research on adolescent mental health, peer relationships, co-rumination, and empathetic distress, the burden experienced by girls who repeatedly provide emotional care within their friendships remains insufficiently understood. Much of the existing research frames social support through the benefits received by the person experiencing distress. Other research examines co-rumination, empathy, emotional labor, and adolescent friendships as separate areas rather than considering how these processes may work together. As a result, less attention has been given to what happens to girls who consistently listen to their friends' problems, provide emotional support, and begin to feel responsible for managing their friends' emotions. This distinction is important because receiving support and repeatedly providing support may not have the same psychological effects. Therefore, this literature review will synthesize research on co-rumination, emotional labor, gendered emotional expectations, and adolescent peer relationships to examine the underexplored psychological burden experienced by teenage girls who repeatedly assume emotional support roles within their friendships.

## **METHODS**

This paper consists of a narrative literature review created by reading and synthesizing thirty-six pre-existing sources concerning emotional support, friendship processes, and mental health among

adolescents. Sources were located through structured searches across electronic academic databases and through the reference lists of relevant studies and literature reviews. Searches used combinations of terms including “adolescent girls,” “female friendships,” “co-rumination,” “peer emotional support,” “peer emotion work,” “emotional caregiving,” “gendered emotional socialization,” “empathetic distress,” “peer contagion,” “anxiety,” and “depression.” Because emotional support burden has not commonly been studied as one established concept, the search included research from several related areas that could help explain the experience of adolescents who repeatedly provide emotional support.

Sources were selected if they were written in English and examined adolescent friendships, peer-support behaviors, emotional disclosure, co-rumination, gender differences in peer relationships, empathetic distress, peer contagion, or internalizing symptoms. The review primarily included peer-reviewed empirical studies and review articles focused on adolescents or youth. Research involving adults, workplaces, or family relationships was included only when it introduced a foundational theory, such as emotional labor, emotion regulation, or the social support buffering hypothesis, or examined a closely related process that has received limited attention within adolescent friendships. News articles, opinion pieces, duplicate sources, and studies without a clear connection to emotional support or peer relationships were excluded. No strict publication-year cutoff was used because older studies were needed to establish foundational theories, although recent adolescent research was prioritized. The thirty-six sources included in the final review were published between 1982 and 2026. After selection, their findings were organized into four themes including co-rumination, peer emotion work and emotional caregiving, gendered emotional socialization, and psychological consequences. The findings were then narratively compared across these themes to identify recurring patterns, gender differences, contradictory findings, and remaining gaps in the literature.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Co-Rumination**

Co-rumination provides a clear explanation for how emotional support within adolescent girls' friendships can feel supportive while also becoming repetitive and psychologically costly. Co-rumination is a dyadic process in which friends extensively discuss problems, repeatedly turn to their possible causes and consequences, and continue to focus on the negative emotions surrounding them. Unlike personal rumination, which takes place within an individual's thoughts, co-rumination occurs through conversations in which both friends participate in and encourage continued problem talk. It also differs

from healthy self-disclosure, which typically leads to close relationships without emotional burden, because the risk does not come from discussing personal emotions itself. Instead, it comes from repeatedly returning to distress without moving toward problem solving, emotional recovery, or resolution (Rose, 2002).

A related but separate process is excessive reassurance seeking, in which someone repeatedly asks another person for confirmation of their worth, relationships, or concerns, even after reassurance has already been provided. Co-rumination and excessive reassurance seeking are not the same behavior, but both demonstrate how support seeking can become repetitive. In both processes, validation may provide temporary relief while failing to resolve the distress that caused the conversation, creating a reason for the person to seek the same support again. Although this connection has been studied more directly among young adults, it provides a possible explanation for how repeated problem talk can develop into an ongoing interpersonal cycle rather than an effective coping strategy (Starr, 2015)

The central feature of co-rumination is the contradiction between its social benefits and psychological costs. Greater co-rumination has been associated with closer, high-quality friendships while also being connected to symptoms of anxiety and depression. Girls also report co-ruminating more frequently than boys, which helps explain both their greater friendship closeness and their higher internalizing symptoms (Rose, 2002). This pattern was further supported through longitudinal research. Among girls, co-rumination predicted increases in positive friendship quality while also predicting increases in anxiety and depressive symptoms over six months. Positive friendship quality and internalizing symptoms then predicted further co-rumination, creating a reciprocal relationship between emotional closeness, distress, and repeated problem talk. Among boys, however, co-rumination predicted increases in positive friendship quality without predicting increases in anxiety or depression (Rose et al., 2007). Therefore, the psychological costs of co-rumination may be especially relevant within girls' friendships, even though its positive effects on closeness can occur among both girls and boys.

This contradiction helps explain why co-rumination continues even when it is connected to emotional distress. Repeatedly discussing a problem can communicate interest, care, and emotional availability, which may make both friends feel understood and supported. These immediate social benefits can reinforce the belief that continuing to discuss the problem is helpful. However, the conversation may remain centered on distress instead of shifting toward solutions or recovery. As a result, the same emotional focus that creates intimacy may also strengthen negative emotion, prolong negative moods, and increase attention toward the seriousness of the problem. This creates a closeness-distress paradox in which friendship bonding and psychological strain develop from the same interaction.

Later research generally supports this relationship, but also shows that the consequences of co-rumination are more complex than a direct cause of internalizing symptoms. Co-rumination has been positively associated with self-reported anxiety, depression, and aggressive behavior, although these associations were not found through teacher reports. Importantly, it was also associated with fewer self-reported friendships and lower teacher-rated social acceptance. Additionally, co-rumination partly explained the

indirect relationship between gender and internalizing symptoms, supporting its possible importance in understanding why girls report more internal distress than boys (Tompkins et al., 2011). These findings suggest that the possible costs of co-rumination may extend beyond private emotional distress and may also affect broader peer functioning. However, because many of the findings were based on correlations, they do not prove that co-rumination independently caused these psychological or social difficulties. However, it is important to note that these effects have not been found consistently across all studies. Among early adolescent girls, co-rumination was associated with both depressive symptoms and positive friendship qualities, but it did not predict overall changes in depression over time, suggesting that its psychological effects may depend on other stressors or individual circumstances (Starr and Davila, 2008). These findings do not remove the possible risks of co-rumination, and instead suggest that its effects may depend on the type of internalizing symptom, the stress surrounding the conversation, and the individual characteristics of the adolescents involved.

The form emotional support takes may also determine whether friendship support remains protective. Best-friend support is generally associated with lower depression, anxiety, and perceived stress, while co-rumination is associated with higher levels of all three forms of psychological distress, even after earlier symptoms are considered. However, the protective relationship between best-friend support and lower depression or perceived stress was only present when co-rumination was relatively low. As co-rumination increased, the protective relationship was no longer significant. At very high levels of co-rumination, greater perceived support was associated with higher perceived stress. Co-rumination did not have the same moderating effect on anxiety, meaning that this pattern was specifically found for depression and perceived stress (van der Mey-Baijens et al., 2025). These findings are important because they suggest that emotional support itself is not necessarily the problem. Instead, support may lose some of its protective value when it becomes organized around repeated, negatively focused problem talk.

Co-rumination also provides a possible explanation for how emotional distress can become shared within friendships. Longitudinal research examining reciprocal same-gender friendship pairs found evidence of depression transmission among both children and adolescents as well as anxiety transmission among girls and older boys. In this context, transmission means that one friend's earlier symptoms predicted changes in the other friend's symptoms over time. Co-rumination helped explain depression transmission among adolescents and anxiety transmission among girls and older boys. In contrast, ordinary self-disclosure did not explain the transmission of either type of symptom (Schwartz-Mette and Rose, 2012). This distinction further demonstrates that emotional openness is not inherently harmful. Instead, the psychological risk appears to come from the repetitive negative focus that separates co-rumination from healthier forms of disclosure.

Taken together, these findings suggest that co-rumination may create an emotional reinforcement cycle within friendships. One friend introduces a problem, both friends repeatedly return to its negative details, and their emotional involvement communicates closeness and understanding. The closeness created through the conversation can encourage them to continue using the same form of support in the future. At the same time, repeatedly focusing on negative emotion may intensify distress, while greater distress may

create more reasons to co-ruminate. This mutual reinforcement explains how co-rumination can cause both bonding and emotional amplification, as the conversation strengthens the friendship while also keeping both friends focused on the problem (Rose et al., 2007; Schwartz-Mette and Rose, 2012).

Overall, the literature demonstrates that co-rumination cannot be understood as entirely helpful or harmful. Its emotional focus can increase intimacy, validation, and positive friendship quality, but it can also weaken the usual protective effects of, reinforce negative emotion, and contribute to the sharing of internalizing symptoms. The strength of these effects may differ depending on gender, the type of distress, the amount of co-rumination, and the stress surrounding the conversation. Additionally, because co-rumination is a mutual process, this research does not by itself prove that one friend always carries more of the emotional burden. However, it identifies one process through which an adolescent who repeatedly listens to and discusses a friend's problems may become involved in the friend's ongoing emotional regulation. If one girl consistently provides more support or begins to feel responsible for managing her friend's distress, this cycle may become especially emotionally demanding. Therefore, co-rumination provides an important foundation for understanding how emotional support can develop into a broader form of emotional caregiving within adolescent girls' friendships.

### **Peer Emotion Work and Emotional Caregiving**

Beyond co-rumination, adolescent girls' friendships may involve a broader form of emotional work. Peer emotion work can include listening to a friend's problems, showing empathy, providing comfort, remaining emotionally available, and helping manage distress (Sahi et al., 2023; Stern et al., 2021). Although these behaviors are usually viewed as normal parts of friendship, they may still require time, attention, and emotional control from the person providing support. When support becomes frequent or one-sided, one friend may begin to feel responsible for managing another person's emotional well-being. This section argues that adolescent girls may experience psychological strain when friendship support develops into chronic emotional caregiving and perceived responsibility for another person's emotions.

Emotional labor theory provides a useful framework for understanding why support-giving can require active emotional effort. Emotional labor has most often been studied as a workplace concept and refers to the management of emotions and emotional expressions in order to meet the expectations of a role. It can be understood as a multifaceted process involving how frequently emotional displays are required, how much attention those displays require, the variety of emotions that must be expressed, and the emotional dissonance that occurs when expressed emotions do not match genuine feelings (Morris and Feldman, 1996). Although this model was not created to describe adolescent friendships, its aspects can still help explain why emotional caregiving may become demanding. A girl supporting a distressed friend may need to remain patient, calm, attentive, and reassuring even when she is tired or overwhelmed herself. In this situation, the support-provider is not only responding to her friend's emotions but is also controlling how she expresses her own.

Emotion-regulation theory further explains the psychological processes involved in this type of emotional management. Emotion regulation refers to the ways people influence which emotions they experience, when they experience them, and how those emotions are expressed. These emotions can be managed at different points through situation selection, situation modification, attention deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation (Gross, 1998). These five points of emotional regulation mean that one may try to change how they interpret a situation before emotions become intense, or they may try to control their response after the emotion is already occurring, displaying how peer support may require several layers of emotional control. Applied to friendship support, these processes suggest that a support-provider may direct attention away from her own feelings, reinterpret the situation so she can remain encouraging, or suppress an emotional response that could make her seem unavailable. Therefore, emotional support may require several layers of regulation in which one friend manages her internal reactions while also attempting to influence the emotions of the other person.

The distinction between surface acting and deep acting provides another way to understand this process. Surface acting occurs when a person changes an outward expression without changing the emotion felt internally, while deep acting involves attempting to change the internal feeling itself. Emotional labor may involve either strategy when someone is trying to meet the emotional expectations of a role (Grandey, 2000). In an adolescent friendship, surface acting could involve appearing calm and supportive while privately feeling stressed, while deep acting could involve trying to create genuine patience or empathy in order to provide support. However, these ideas were developed for workplace settings and do not directly prove that adolescents experience friendship support in the same way. Instead, they provide a theoretical explanation for why repeatedly hiding distress or producing supportive emotional responses could eventually become draining.

The concept of emotion work helps extend this framework beyond formal employment and into close relationships. Emotion work includes behavior intended to improve another person's emotional well-being and maintain the emotional climate of a relationship. This can involve listening, reassurance, empathy, and responsiveness. Research examining emotion work within adult families found that its performance was connected more closely to gender construction than biological sex, suggesting that emotional responsibilities may become part of how people understand and perform gender within relationships (Erickson, 2005). Although this study examined employed, married parents rather than adolescents, it supports the broader idea that emotional care is a meaningful and often overlooked form of relational work. Applied to adolescent friendships, this framework makes visible the effort involved in supporting behaviors that may otherwise be treated as natural or expected from girls.

Adolescent-specific research helps apply these frameworks to friendships. Research on peer emotion regulation demonstrates that adolescents do actively influence one another's emotional experiences. Adolescence involves both an increased need for emotion regulation and greater sensitivity to peer feedback, social interactions, and peer relationships. This sensitivity can create vulnerability when peer interactions involve rejection or negatively focused behavior, but it can also create an opportunity for friends to help one another regulate emotions. Additionally, peers may not only simply listen to emotional

problems, and instead they may also actively participate in changing how friends understand those problems (Sahi et al., 2023). This makes peer support an active form of interpersonal emotion regulation. However, the review focuses mainly on how peers can improve adolescent regulation and does not directly examine the possible cost to the friend providing that help.

Other adolescent research shows that emotional support is a measurable developmental skill rather than only a casual friendship behavior. Empathetic support includes emotional and practical support, emotional engagement, and the ability to understand and interpret a friend's problem. Secure attachment at age fourteen predicted a greater capacity to provide empathetic support during observed friendship interactions from ages sixteen to eighteen. Attachment security also predicted the extent to which friends called on adolescents for support, and adolescents' responses were connected to those calls for help (Stern et al., 2021). These findings suggest that some adolescents may become especially trusted support-providers within their friendships. However, the study examined the development of support

competence rather than whether being repeatedly called on for support eventually created an emotional burden.

Emotional support competence also appears to develop within adolescent friendships and influence later relationships. Greater support competence predicted increases in friendship quality over time and later supportiveness in young-adult romantic relationships, demonstrating that providing emotional care can strengthen relationships and become an important social skill. However, increases in emotional support competence also predicted decreases in the support adolescents received from their friends (Costello et al., 2023). This result does not prove that supportive adolescents were completely forgotten about or that their friendships became one-sided. Still, it creates an important question about whether adolescents who become skilled at giving support may not always receive an equal amount of support in return. If this pattern becomes stable, one friend may repeatedly occupy the support-provider role while the other becomes the primary support-receiver.

The most direct evidence for the possible emotional cost of peer caregiving comes from research on empathetic distress. Empathetic distress occurs when someone strongly shares a friend's distress to the point of experiencing that distress as her own. Girls reported greater empathetic distress than boys, while social perspective taking was associated with both positive friendship quality and greater empathetic distress. Co-rumination partly explained both relationships, suggesting that understanding a friend's perspective and repeatedly discussing the friend's problems may strengthen closeness while also increasing the possibility of absorbing the friend's distress (Smith and Rose, 2011). This pattern was described as a "cost of caring" because the same emotional awareness that helps someone become a supportive friend may also make that person more vulnerable to emotional drain.

However, empathy itself should not be understood as inherently harmful. A distinction can be made between empathetic distress, which involves sharing in a friend's negative emotions, and empathetic joy, which involves sharing in a friend's positive experiences. Adolescent girls reported greater levels of both

types of emotional engagement than boys, suggesting that girls generally become more emotionally involved in their friends' experiences. Empathetic distress was found to have positive implications for friendship adjustment but negative implications for emotional well-being. In contrast, empathetic joy was associated with greater positive friendship quality and fewer internalizing symptoms (Smith, 2015). These findings show that the psychological effect of empathy depends partly on the type of emotion being shared. Emotional engagement may support both closeness and well-being when it includes sharing in positive emotions, while repeatedly taking on another person's distress may cause emotional strain.

Overall, peer emotional caregiving should be understood as both developmentally important and potentially demanding. The ability to provide empathy, reassurance, and emotional regulation can strengthen friendships and contribute to later relationship skills. At the same time, support may become psychologically straining when one friend is repeatedly expected to remain available, manage the emotional climate of the friendship, and absorb another person's distress without receiving comparable support. Existing research shows that adolescents provide measurable emotional support and that empathetic distress can create a "cost of caring." However, it has not fully examined the long-term experience of adolescents who consistently act as the support-provider and feel responsible for keeping their friends emotionally stable. This represents an important gap because peer support is usually examined through its benefits for the person receiving care, while less attention is given to the adolescent repeatedly providing it. Therefore, peer emotion work provides a framework for understanding how healthy friendship support may develop into emotional overextension, especially among girls who become their friends' primary sources of emotional care.

## **Gendered Emotional Socialization**

Gendered emotional socialization provides an important framework for understanding why adolescent girls may be especially vulnerable to emotional caregiving burden. Girls are often encouraged to value emotional awareness, empathy, responsiveness, and the maintenance of close relationships. These expectations can help girls form meaningful and supportive friendships, but at the same time they may also create pressure to remain emotionally available and respond to others' distress (Cross and Madson, 1997; Rose and Rudolph, 2006). These patterns should be understood as average gender differences rather than traits shared by all girls or absent among boys. Overall, gendered emotional expectations may cause emotional attentiveness to become a social strength and a possible source of vulnerability when support becomes one-sided or connected to responsibility for a friend's emotional well-being.

One theoretical explanation for these patterns is the idea of an interdependent self-construal. Which means that a person understands their identity partly through close relationships and their connections to others. Women in the U.S. culture have been found to be more likely than men to define themselves through relationships and place greater importance on relational harmony, the needs of others, and responsiveness to others (Cross and Madson, 1997). When applied to adolescent friendships, this framework suggests that girls may be encouraged to view being caring and emotionally supportive as important parts of being a good friend. As a result, a friend's emotional distress or a problem within the

friendship may feel personally important rather than separate from their own well-being. However, this framework does not directly examine emotional caregiving burden among adolescent girls. Instead, it provides a possible explanation for why setting limits on emotional support may become difficult when maintaining relationships is connected to a girl's identity and sense of responsibility.

Research focused more directly on peer relationships supports the idea that girls' friendships often emphasize emotional connection. Compared with boys, girls have generally been found to organize in smaller, more intimate groups, engage in more prosocial behavior with friends, and engage in more self-disclosure. Girls also tend to place greater importance on social goals involving mutual participation, support, and interpersonal connection, while boys are more likely to adopt goals that emphasize dominance, self-interest, privacy, and control in social situations. Furthermore, girls have been found to show greater sensitivity to others' distress and the condition of their relationships, including concerns about abandonment, loneliness, loss of relationships as a result of expressing anger, social evaluation, and hurting others (Rose and Rudolph, 2006). These patterns can promote empathy, intimacy, and supportive friendships, but they can also create more opportunities for girls to become involved in friends' emotional problems.

These differences appear to become especially important during the transition into adolescence. Junior-high girls placed greater value on emotionally supportive qualities in friendships, such as intimacy and emotional support, while junior-high boys placed greater value on activity-based qualities, such as companionship. These differences were less apparent among elementary-school students, suggesting that gendered friendship expectations may become more pronounced as adolescents grow older (Rudolph and Dodson, 2022). Importantly, the study compared different age groups rather than following the same adolescents over time. Therefore, it cannot directly prove that individual girls increasingly value emotional support as they age. However, the findings still suggest that adolescence is an important period in which intimacy and support become particularly central to girls' expectations for friendship.

Observational research also shows what these expectations can look like during actual friendship conversations. Girls participated in more problem talk than boys and responded to their friends' problems in more positive and engaged ways, including offering support, agreeing, asking questions, and encouraging their friends to continue speaking. In contrast, boys used humor more often during problem-focused conversations. For both girls and boys, participating in problem talk and responding positively predicted increased feelings of friendship closeness over time. However, the closeness benefits of these conversations may not always be equal for both friends, as evidence indicates that listening to a friend's problems or giving supportive responses did not necessarily produce the same closeness benefit for the support provider (Rose et al., 2016). This finding helps explain why emotionally intense conversations may continue, as discussing problems and responding supportively can strengthen the relationship and make both friends feel closer. It is important to note that the study focused on closeness rather than emotional burden.

Friendships may also reinforce empathy and emotional responsiveness over time. Adolescents tend to form friendships with peers who have similar levels of empathy, but friendships can also influence the development of empathy. Adolescents with more empathetic friends showed increases in empathetic concern and perspective-taking compared with adolescents whose friends were less empathetic, even after their initial similarities were considered (Miklikowska et al., 2022). This suggests that friendships do not simply reflect emotional qualities that adolescents already possess. Instead, repeated interactions with empathetic friends may strengthen concern, perspective-taking, and responsiveness. Although this study did not demonstrate a gender-specific caregiving burden, it provides evidence that peer relationships can reinforce the emotional skills involved in supporting others and may help explain how adolescent friendship contexts can reinforce emotional caregiving roles when combined with studies showing that girls' friendships often emphasize intimacy, support, and problem talk.

The emotional intensity of girls' friendships may become particularly important because adolescent girls also report high levels of interpersonal stress. A review of research found that girls experienced more stress involving family and friends, perceived negative interpersonal events as more stressful, and experienced more negative emotion within family and peer contexts. However, evidence was inconsistent on whether interpersonal stress was more strongly connected to emotional distress among girls than boys across all studies (Rudolph, 2002). In Rudolph's own early-adolescent sample, girls reported more friendship stress, while boys reported more stress within the broader peer group. Friendship stress also partly accounted for girls' higher anxiety and depressive symptoms, suggesting that the type of interpersonal stress matters. Therefore, repeated involvement in close friends' distress may be especially relevant to girls' emotional well-being, although the study did not directly examine emotional caregiving burden..

It is also important to distinguish experiencing internalizing symptoms from directly absorbing a friend's emotions. Research has consistently shown that gender differences in depression emerge during adolescence and may result from vulnerabilities interacting with the new biological, psychological, and social challenges of this developmental period (Nolen-Hoeksema and Girgus, 1994). This evidence does not prove that providing emotional support causes girls to develop anxiety or depression. Instead, it indicates that adolescence is already a period of increased internalizing vulnerability for girls. Chronic exposure to interpersonal distress may become especially important within this context, particularly when girls feel responsible for maintaining their friendships or managing their friends' emotional well-being.

Overall, the literature on gendered emotional socialization suggests that adolescent girls' emotional attentiveness is shaped and reinforced through both broader gender expectations and close friendship experiences. Girls generally place greater importance on intimacy, support, self-disclosure, and relational maintenance, while their friendships provide repeated opportunities to practice empathy and respond to others' problems. These qualities can strengthen closeness and create valuable support systems, but they may also increase girls' exposure to interpersonal distress and expectations of emotional availability. Existing research does not directly prove that gendered socialization causes emotional caregiving burden. However, it reveals a possible pathway through which girls may become more likely to assume

emotionally demanding roles, in which they are encouraged to value relational care, participate in more emotionally intense interactions, and may already be especially vulnerable to interpersonal stress and internalizing symptoms. Therefore, gendered emotional socialization helps explain why providing support may remain meaningful to adolescent girls while also becoming psychologically costly when it is repetitive, uneven, or tied to responsibility for a friend's emotions.

## **Psychological Consequences**

Chronic emotional caregiving within adolescent friendships may have psychological consequences when support-providers become repeatedly involved in their friends' distress. The strongest evidence for these consequences involves research on empathetic distress, emotional contagion, and internalizing symptoms. Research also suggests that certain adolescents may become emotionally over-involved when close friendships involve repeated problem talk and reassurance seeking. However, emotional exhaustion and unclear boundaries have limited direct research within adolescent friendships. Therefore, these outcomes should be understood as possible consequences suggested by the existing literature rather than fully established effects of providing emotional support.

Empathetic distress provides one explanation for how caring about a friend may become psychologically burdensome. Empathetic distress refers to sharing in a friend's negative emotions or experiences to the point of beginning to experience that friend's distress as one's own. Among early adolescents, girls reported greater empathetic distress than boys. Social perspective-taking, which refers to the ability to understand a friend's thoughts and feelings, was associated with higher friendship quality and greater empathetic distress. Additionally, co-rumination was found to partly explain these relationships, suggesting that understanding a friend's perspective may lead to greater closeness while also encouraging repeated involvement in a friend's problems (Smith and Rose, 2011). These findings show a possible "cost of caring," in which emotional awareness strengthens the friendship but also makes it more difficult for the support-provider to remain emotionally separate from the friend's distress, or in other words, the same qualities providing support in adolescent friendships may also increase vulnerability to absorbing friends' distress.

Later research provides further evidence of this emotional trade-off. Adolescent girls reported greater empathetic distress and empathetic joy, meaning that they were more likely than boys to share in both their friends' negative and positive emotional experiences. Empathetic distress was linked to positive friendship quality, suggesting that becoming emotionally involved in a friend's problems may contribute to feelings of closeness. However, it was also associated with higher internalizing symptoms, while empathetic joy was related to both greater friendship quality and fewer internalizing symptoms (Smith, 2015). This distinction is important because it indicates that empathy itself is not inherently harmful. Instead, psychological strain may develop when emotional engagement is primarily focused on a friend's negative emotions or experiences. Because this study relied on adolescents' reports of their experiences, it does not prove that empathetic distress directly causes anxiety or depression. However, it shows evidence that sharing a friend's distress can be connected to both relational benefits and emotional burden.

Peer contagion provides a broader framework for understanding how distress may become reinforced within friendships. Peer contagion refers to a mutual influence process in which peers strengthen each other's emotions or behaviors over time. Vulnerability to peer influence increases throughout childhood and becomes especially important during adolescence, meaning that close friendships can shape both positive and negative development. Although peer relationships can provide protection and support, they may also increase maladaptive patterns when friends repeatedly reinforce negative emotions (Dishion and Tipsord, 2011). This framework does not provide that emotional caregiving causes psychological symptoms. Instead, it explains how repeated exposure and mutual reinforcement within a close friendship could increase distress.

Longitudinal research provides more specific evidence that depressive symptoms can become socialized within adolescent friendships. One study found that vulnerability to a best friend's depressive symptoms depended on characteristics of the adolescent and the friendship itself. Among girls, higher social anxiety was connected to greater vulnerability to depressive-symptom contagion, suggesting that girls who were especially concerned about social judgment or relationships may have been more influenced by their friends' symptoms. In contrast, boys did not share the same pattern, showing that peer contagion does not occur in the same way for every adolescent (Prinstein, 2007). Therefore, the transmission of distress appears to depend on an individual's vulnerability rather than simply having a friend who experiences depressive symptoms.

Similar evidence was found in a study of same-gender adolescent best-friend dyads. In stable female friendships, friends became increasingly similar in their depressive symptoms over time. This similarity was explained by socialization rather than selection, meaning that the girls did not choose friends who already had similar symptoms, and instead one friend's symptoms predicted later changes in the other friend's symptoms. This socialization was found in female friendship dyads but not in male friendship dyads (Giletta et al., 2011). These findings suggest that stable female friendships may provide an important context for depressive symptom transmission. Overall, it supports the possibility that distress can become shared within close friendships.

Research on broader peer networks further shows that emotional similarity does not always result from direct contagion between two close friends. Adolescents may select peers with similar depressive symptoms, end relationships with peers who become less similar, and move toward the average symptom level of their peer group over time (Kiuru et al., 2012). This finding provides an important distinction because friends may become emotionally similar through several processes, not only because one person absorbs another's distress. However, evidence still suggests that adolescents' emotional adjustment is partly shaped by the peer environments they participate in. Overall, the findings from best-friend and peer-network studies indicate that emotional distress can become shared or amplified, but that the process depends on the type of relationship and the individual adolescent involved.

Co-rumination provides a more specific process in which such transmission may occur. As discussed earlier, co-rumination involves repeatedly discussing problems and negative feelings without moving toward a resolution. Co-rumination helped explain the transmission of depressive symptoms among adolescents and anxiety symptoms among girls and older boys. Common self-disclosure did not explain such effects, suggesting that emotional openness alone was not the source of the psychological risk. Instead, the risk seemed to come from the repetitive and negatively focused problem discussion (Schwartz-Mette and Rose, 2012). This distinction is important because it shows that adolescents do not need to avoid discussing emotions with friends, but that problems may develop when support primarily focuses on distress instead of coping or problem-solving.

Research also suggests that co-rumination may weaken the protective value of friendship support. When co-rumination was low, best-friend support was associated with fewer depressive symptoms and lower perceived stress. At moderate levels of co-rumination the positive effects of best-friend support decreased, and at high levels of co-rumination greater support was associated with higher perceived stress. This pattern was found for depressive symptoms and perceived stress but not anxiety symptoms (van der Mey-Baijens et al., 2025). Therefore, emotional support may become less helpful when it repeatedly returns to distress. This supports the idea that the form of support matters, as emotional availability may be protective when it promotes coping, but it may become psychologically demanding when it reinforces negative emotions.

The risk of emotional over-involvement also seems to depend on specific characteristics of the adolescent and the friendship itself. Co-rumination promoted depressive-symptom contagion only under conditions of adolescents' high personal distress, friends' high excessive reassurance seeking, and high positive friendship quality. Personal distress may cause an adolescent to be more emotionally reactive to a friend's problems, while excessive reassurance seeking can create a repetitive need for validation. Additionally, high friendship quality may increase this risk because close friends are more likely to stay engaged with each other's emotions and experiences (Schwartz-Mette and Smith, 2018). Therefore, closeness does not automatically protect adolescents from psychological strain. Under certain conditions, the same intimacy that makes support feel meaningful may also make it harder for the support-provider to separate themselves from a friend's distress and maintain emotional boundaries.

These findings provide indirect support for possible boundary difficulties, but they do not directly demonstrate the loss of emotional boundaries. Empathetic distress shows that adolescents can experience a friend's emotions as their own, while research on personal distress and reassurance seeking shows how some friendships may involve repeated emotional demands. These processes may cause support-providers to feel overly involved or unable to separate their own emotions from their friends' problems. However, the existing studies did not directly measure whether adolescents felt unable to set boundaries, felt responsible for regulating their friends' emotions, or felt emotionally exhausted by the support-provider role. This limitation represents an important gap as the psychological effects of symptom transmission are better understood than the experiences of adolescents who repeatedly provide the support.

Overall, the literature suggests that emotional caregiving may become psychologically burdensome when support-providers repeatedly discuss and reinforce their friends' distress. Empathetic distress shows how a friend's negative emotions may begin to affect the support-provider's own emotional well-being, while research on peer contagion shows that depressive and anxiety-related symptoms can transmit within close friendships. Co-rumination provides one method for this process because repetitive problem talk can strengthen closeness while also increasing internalizing symptoms and reducing the positive or protective effects of friendship support. However, the literature provides less direct evidence pertaining to emotional exhaustion, boundary difficulties, and identity fusion. Therefore, existing findings support the possibility that chronic emotional caregiving contributes to psychological strain, but further research is needed to examine whether adolescent girls who repeatedly act as emotional caregivers experience exhaustion, difficulties setting boundaries, or a strong sense of responsibility for their friends' emotional well-being.

## Synthesis of Reviewed Literature

Although the four areas of research reviewed in this paper examine different friendship processes, they provide related evidence concerning how emotional support may become psychologically demanding. Table 1 summarizes the major findings within each section, the gender-related patterns identified by existing research, and how each area contributes to the central argument of this review. It also separates well-supported findings concerning friendship processes and internalizing symptoms from interpretations about chronic emotional caregiving that have not yet been directly tested.

**Table 1:** Synthesis of the Literature and Its Relationship to Emotional Support Burden

| Literature Area | Main Findings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Gender-Related Findings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Relationship to the Central Claims and Remaining Gap                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Co-Rumination   | Repetitive and negatively focused problem talk is associated with closer, higher-quality friendships and with greater internalizing symptoms. Longitudinal research found that co-rumination predicted increases in friendship quality, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among girls, and it | Girls generally report more co-rumination than boys. In one longitudinal study, co-rumination predicted increases in friendship quality and internalizing symptoms among girls, while it predicted friendship benefits without the same increase in internalizing symptoms among boys (Rose et al., 2007). | Provides the clearest evidence that supportive friendship behavior can predict closeness and distress at the same time. However, co-rumination is a shared conversational process and does not show whether one friend consistently carries more of the emotional-support burden. |

|                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                            | <p>helped explain the transmission of depressive and anxiety symptoms within some adolescent friendships. More recent research found that co-rumination weakened the protective association of best-friend support with depressive symptoms and perceived stress, but not anxiety (Rose, 2002; Rose et al., 2007; Schwartz-Mette and Rose, 2012; van der Mey-Baijens et al., 2025)</p> |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Peer Emotion Work and Emotional Caregiving | <p>Research indicated that peers can help adolescents regulate negative emotions and that emotional-support skills develop within close friendships. Greater support competence has been linked to later friendship quality and support competence in later relationships (Sahi et al., 2023; Stern et al., 2021; Costello et al., 2023).</p>                                          | <p>These studies often examine adolescent support more generally, meaning that direct evidence concerning gender differences in support competence and provider burden remains limited.</p> | <p>Establishes that adolescents perform meaningful emotional work within friendships. However, existing measures focus on the ability or effectiveness of providing support rather than its frequency, imbalance, perceived responsibility, or psychological cost to the provider.</p> |
| Gendered Emotional Socialization           | <p>Girls' friendships generally place greater emphasis on emotional</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <p>Girls report more problem talk, self-disclosure, engaged</p>                                                                                                                             | <p>Suggests that girls may experience more opportunities and</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

|                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                            | intimacy, empathy, disclosure, relationship maintenance, and engaged responses to friends' problems. Friendships may also reinforce empathy and emotional responsiveness over time (Rose and Rudolph, 2006; Rose et al., 2016; Miklikowska et al., 2022; Rudolph and Dodson, 2022).                                                                          | responses, and emotional involvement in friendships. These patterns describe group differences and do not apply to every girl or exclude boys from emotionally supportive friendships.                                             | expectations to provide emotional support. However, this research does not directly show that gendered socialization causes girls to enter chronic caregiving roles or experience psychological burden.                                                                                     |
| Psychological Consequences | Empathetic distress has been associated with depressive and anxiety symptoms. Longitudinal friendship research has also found socialization of depressive symptoms and, within some groups, anxiety symptoms. Co-rumination may partly explain these contagion patterns (Smith and Rose, 2011; Smith, 2015; Prinstein, 2007; Schwartz-Mette and Rose, 2012). | Girls report greater empathetic distress than boys. In one study, depression contagion was found across youth, while anxiety contagion was found among girls and older boys (Smith and Rose, 2011; Schwartz-Mette and Rose, 2012). | Shows that a friend's distress may become shared or intensified within close relationships. However, contagion studies generally measure symptoms similarity or change in symptoms rather than support-provider responsibility, emotional exhaustion, or difficulty maintaining boundaries. |

As shown in Table 1, co-rumination provides the clearest evidence of the contradiction between emotional closeness and psychological distress. Research on peer emotion work further shows that adolescents actively help friends regulate emotions, while gendered emotional socialization suggests that girls may experience more opportunities and expectations to participate in emotionally supportive conversations. Research on empathetic distress and peer contagion then shows that friends' distress and internalizing symptoms can become shared or intensified within close relationships. Together, these areas

of research may be understood as different parts of a possible process through which emotional support strengthens a friendship while also creating psychological demands for those involved.

However, none of these areas of research directly measure the cumulative burden carried by an adolescent who repeatedly occupies the support-provider role. Co-rumination measures shared problem talk, support competence measures the ability to provide support, and peer-contagion research measures changes or similarities in psychological symptoms. These constructs do not directly measure how frequently one adolescent provides support, whether that support is reciprocal, how responsible the provider feels, or whether the role of the support-provider is associated with boundary difficulties or emotional exhaustion. Therefore, the reviewed literature supports the possibility of emotional caregiving burden but does not establish chronic support-giving as a direct cause of psychological strain. This remaining gap provides the basis for the Discussion and the need for future research focused specifically on adolescent support-providers.

## **DISCUSSION**

Overall, the literature reviewed in this paper reveals an important contradiction within adolescent friendships. Close friendships and social support are generally associated with positive benefits and better emotional adjustment because they provide adolescents with support during stressful experiences and emotional intimacy. However, the psychological effects of support depend on the quality and form of the interaction. When support becomes focused on repeated problem talk, constant emotional availability, or responsibility for another person's well-being, the same behaviors that create closeness may also contribute to psychological strain. Therefore, emotional support should not be understood as automatically helpful or harmful. Instead, its effects seem to depend on whether the interaction helps adolescents cope with distress or keeps them focused on it without resolution (Cohen and Wills, 1985; La Greca and Harrison, 2005; Rose, 2002).

Co-rumination is one of the most direct or clearest explanations for this contradiction. Repeatedly discussing problems can make adolescents feel understood and emotionally close to their friends. At the same time, continuing to return to negative emotions without a resolution may increase internalizing symptoms and perceived stress. Longitudinal evidence shows that co-rumination can predict increases in both improved friendship quality and internalizing symptoms, showing that its social benefits and psychological costs can develop together (Rose et al., 2007). This finding is especially important because co-rumination may not appear harmful from within the friendship. Therefore, adolescents may continue the pattern because the conversations seem to strengthen emotional closeness even when they are not actually helping either person recover from distress.

Gendered emotional socialization may help explain why this contradiction is especially relevant to adolescent girls. Girls generally place greater importance on emotional intimacy, self-disclosure, and relational harmony within friendships. These differences become more evident during adolescence, as it is

a period when friendships become important sources of identity and support (Rose and Rudolph, 2006; Rudolph and Dodson, 2022). Observational research also shows that girls participate in more problem talk and respond to friends' problems in more positive ways. These responses have been shown to strengthen closeness and encourage continued disclosure or problem talk (Rose et al., 2016). Therefore, girls may have more opportunities to provide emotional support and become involved in their friends' distress.

However, it is important to mention that these gender differences should not be interpreted as universal. Not every girl assumes an emotional caregiving role, and boys can also form emotionally close friendships and experience the costs of co-rumination. Instead, the research describes average differences in friendship behaviors and expectations. These patterns may be shaped by broader social expectations that encourage girls to be emotionally attentive and to feel responsible for maintaining relationships. As a result, some girls may see emotional availability as a vital part of being a good friend, making it difficult to separate themselves from a friend's distress when support becomes emotionally demanding (Cross and Madson, 1997; Rose and Rudolph, 2006).

Research on peer emotion work further suggests that adolescents can play important roles in helping friends manage emotions. Supportive friends may provide comfort, show empathy, and respond to or help regulate distress. Studies of adolescent support competence show that these skills can strengthen friendships and contribute to later relationship development (Stern et al., 2021; Costello et al., 2023). However, these studies generally focus on whether adolescents are capable of providing effective support rather than how providing that support affects them psychologically. Similarly, research on peers' involvement in emotion regulation shows that friends can help adolescents manage emotions, but it gives limited evidence about the possible burden experienced by the person providing the help (Sahi et al., 2023). Therefore, the evidence to support peer behavior is well established, while the emotional consequences of repeatedly taking on the role of a support-provider remain less understood.

The strongest direct evidence of a possible support-provider cost comes from research on empathetic distress. Empathetic distress occurs when adolescents share a friend's negative emotions or distress so strongly that they begin to experience the distress as their own. This has been shown to correlate to both positive friendship quality and internalizing symptoms, showing another contradiction in which closeness and emotional strain develop together. Girls also report higher levels of empathetic distress than boys, which may reflect their greater emotional involvement in friends' problems (Smith and Rose, 2011; Smith, 2015). These findings support the idea that caring for a friend may become psychologically demanding when normal empathy turns into repeatedly absorbing distress or negative emotional experiences.

Research on peer contagion provides additional evidence that distress can become shared or intensified within close friendships. Depressive symptoms have been found to become more similar over time within some adolescent friendships, particularly within stable female best-friendships. Adolescents' vulnerability to these effects depends on characteristics of the individual adolescent and friendship itself, including characteristics of social anxiety, personal distress, friendship quality, and reassurance-seeking behavior

(Prinstein, 2007; Giletta et al., 2011; Schwartz-Mette and Smith, 2018). Co-rumination may contribute to such transmission because repeatedly discussing negative emotions can keep both friends focused on distress. Importantly, common self-disclosure did not explain the transmission of anxiety and depressive symptoms, suggesting that healthy emotional openness is not the problem. Instead, the risk seems to come from repetitive problem talk with no resolution (Schwartz-Mette and Rose, 2012).

At the same time, findings regarding emotional contagion require careful interpretation. Friends may become similar in depressive symptoms because they influence each other, but they may also select peers who already have similar symptoms or even end friendships when they become different emotionally. Broader peer groups can also influence adolescents through gradual movement toward the emotional patterns of the group (Kiuru et al., 2012). Therefore, similarity in symptoms does not automatically prove that one friend's distress was absorbed by another through emotional caregiving. Still, evidence of socialization within stable female friendships and the mediating role of co-rumination suggests that direct peer influence can occur under certain conditions.

Another important finding is that the psychological effects of co-rumination are not equally as strong in every friendship. Co-rumination was more likely to promote contagion of depressive symptoms when adolescents experienced high personal distress, when their friends engaged in excessive reassurance seeking, or when the friendship had high positive quality (Schwartz-Mette and Smith, 2018). Similarly, best-friend support was associated with lower depression and perceived stress when co-rumination was low, but this protective nature of support seemed to disappear as co-rumination increased. At high levels of co-rumination, greater friendship support was associated with higher perceived stress (van der Mey-Baijens et al., 2025). These findings indicate that emotional closeness is not automatically protective, as some supportive friendships may create more opportunities for negative or repeated emotional involvement.

Despite these findings, the existing literature does not directly establish chronic emotional caregiving as a sole cause of psychological risk. Co-rumination describes a pattern in which both friends participate in problem talk, in which emotional caregiving may be uneven, as one person continuously gives support and the other continuously receives it. Peer contagion research shows changes in symptoms but does not identify whether one adolescent was acting as the primary support-provider. Empathetic distress shows that adolescents can take on friends' emotions, but it does not directly measure whether they feel responsible for remaining emotionally available, are unable to set boundaries, or feel responsible for solving their friends' problems. Therefore, the reviewed literature provides indirect evidence of emotional caregiving burden, but they do not fully look at the experience itself.

Furthermore, the research also provides limited direct evidence regarding emotional exhaustion, identity fusion, or unclear boundaries in adolescent friendships. These ideas are suggested by findings within research on empathetic distress, personal distress, symptom contagion, and excessive reassurance seeking. However, the studies do not directly measure whether adolescents feel emotionally drained or have problems separating their own emotions from those of their friends. Several studies also used self-reports

and associations measured at one point, making it difficult to determine whether friendship processes lead to internalizing symptoms or whether adolescents with existing symptoms are more likely to engage in those friendship patterns. Although longitudinal research shows stronger evidence of changes over time, it still cannot always separate emotional caregiving from other friendship influences.

Therefore, future research should directly study adolescents who repeatedly act as emotional support-providers. Studies could measure how frequently adolescents provide support, whether the support is reciprocal, how responsible they feel for their friends' well-being, and whether they believe setting boundaries will cause damage within the friendship. Research should also look at emotional exhaustion, anxiety, perceived stress, and difficulty separating a friend's distress from one's own emotions. Longitudinal studies that collect information from both members of a friendship would help determine how support-provider and support-receiver roles develop over time. Additionally, interviews

could also help researchers understand how adolescents describe their own roles within the friendship.

Lastly, future studies should also consider differences beyond comparisons between girls and boys. This could include cultural expectations, family emotional socialization, friendship structure, and gender identity, all of which may influence how adolescents understand emotional support. By examining more diverse groups, researchers could determine whether emotional caregiving burden is especially common among adolescent girls or whether such patterns develop in other friendships under different expectations. This would provide a clearer understanding of whether gender itself predicts emotional burden or whether other factors, such as emotional sensitivity, friendship intensity, and perceived responsibility, are more important.

Overall, the findings do not suggest that adolescent girls should avoid emotional openness or supporting their friends, as emotional support remains an important part of close and healthy friendships. Instead, the literature suggests that support may become psychologically burdensome when it is one-sided, chronic, and primarily focused on distress with no resolution. The important distinction is between support that promotes healthy coping and support that makes one adolescent feel continuously responsible for another person's emotions or well-being. Recognizing this distinction allows adolescent friendships to be understood as relationships that can provide protection and positive effects while also creating emotional demands. Lastly, this distinction is especially important because the emotional effects of support-giving may go unnoticed when a friendship feels close and supportive, meaning that girls may experience psychological strain without recognizing that their role as a support-provider is contributing to it.

## CONCLUSION

Adolescent friendships are important sources of intimacy, identity development, and emotional support. For adolescent girls in particular, friendships often involve emotional disclosure, empathy, and concern for maintaining closeness. Although such qualities can provide important mental health benefits, they may

also create conditions in which emotional support becomes repetitive and psychologically demanding. The reviewed literature shows that co-rumination can strengthen friendship quality while also increasing vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and perceived stress. Research focused on empathetic distress and peer contagion further suggests that friends' negative emotions and internalizing symptoms can become shared or even intensified within close relationships.

Gendered emotional socialization and peer emotion work provide possible explanations for why some girls may be especially likely to assume emotional caregiving roles. Girls are often encouraged to be more relationship-focused and attentive to others' needs. During adolescence, these expectations may become reinforced through emotionally close or intimate friendships that create greater closeness from initial disclosure and supportive responses. As a result, emotional caregiving may remain meaningful even when it becomes hard to manage.

However, the present literature does not directly establish that providing chronic emotional support causes emotional strain or boundary difficulties. Most studies examine related processes, such as co-rumination, empathetic distress, support competence, and symptom contagion, rather than the actual experiences and psychological outcomes of adolescents who repeatedly act as central emotional caregivers. Therefore, existing research provides strong indirect evidence of a possible psychological burden but limited direct evidence about how chronic support-giving affects adolescent girls.

To conclude, emotional support within adolescent friendships is not inherently harmful. Its psychological effects appear to depend on whether the support is balanced, creates healthy coping, and allows both adolescents to maintain emotional separation. Emotional caregiving may become costly when one friend feels continuously responsible for another's well-being or repeatedly absorbs distress. Further research is needed to directly examine emotional exhaustion, boundary-setting, and perceived responsibility among support-providers during adolescence. This gap is important because understanding the person providing support is necessary for creating a more complete view of how adolescent friendships can function as protective relationships and sources of psychological burden or strain.

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