Gaining a better understanding of how a mother's symptoms of depression influences her child

2014-09-17

By Eric Brousseau with Amanda Shamblaw
Photo by Eric Brousseau

Clinical Psychology Master's student Amanda Shamblaw wants to know how a mother's symptoms of depression affect her child. Amanda works in Dr. Kate Harkness' Mood Lab, where she studies the origins of depression and how both heredity and life events contribute to the onset and duration of depression.

Amanda completed a BSc in Nursing degree and a BA, Honors Specialization in Psychology degree before beginning her career in the Mental Health Care Program at London Health Sciences Centre. It was during her two years of nursing that she decided to pursue a career in clinical psychology.

Working on an inpatient unit Amanda was witness to the complex interaction played between biology, psychology, and the environment on the development and maintenance of mental disorders. But she wasn't satisfied with just seeing it. She wanted to understand 'how' and 'why'.

"I realized I needed to pursue further education in order to truly make an impact on the mental health care field," Amanda says. "I was drawn to the analytic nature of research and the opportunity to contribute to a much larger population."

After reading an article by Dr. Harkness, Amanda decided she wanted to join the Mood Lab and contribute to the exciting and collaborative atmosphere at Queen's Psychology.

For her Master's research Amanda is looking at how maternal symptoms of depression affects a child's social and cognitive development. Specifically she is interested in children’s 'theory of mind' (Wellman, 1990). Studies suggest that theory of mind understanding is linked with social functioning and as a result, situations interfering with the development of this understanding have negative implications for children’s social relationships. "Studies have shown that maternal depression is a known risk factor for children’s later social and emotional difficulties," Amanda explains. "My focus is on how maternal depression impacts children’s theory of mind understanding."
To gain a better understanding of exactly how maternal depression influences the child, Amanda is using previously collected data from a child study conducted in the Early Experience Lab and contacting mothers to obtain a history of depressive symptoms. She is also using videos of the mother and her child to obtain measures of affectionate contact as well as vocal anhedonia.

Amanda’s hope is that her study will contribute to understanding the transmission of risk factors for depression and avenues for possible intervention in this cycle. “Having worked in a hospital I appreciate how many resources can be saved - most importantly the time and energy of the individual - by taking a proactive, preventative approach as opposed to simply a reactive approach”, Amanda says. “Understanding the mechanisms by which maternal depression affects children’s social functioning is one of the first steps to developing effective prevention efforts.”