



Adverse conditions

Drs Gordon Flett and **Abby Goldstein** investigate how adversity affects people in different ways. Here, they discuss the different career paths they have taken, and how they hope to undertake research that really matters

Dr Goldstein, could you start us off by describing the central ideas that underpin your research?

My research has been significantly influenced by my clinical experiences, which include working with adolescents, emerging adults and adults experiencing both mental health and substance use issues.

In my clinical work, I became passionate about understanding the mechanisms through which early adversity influences these issues, and also how these mechanisms might be addressed in the context of strength-based interventions, including Motivational Interviewing.

My primary focus is on identifying critical pathways or mediating mechanisms that underlie the relationship between early experiences and risk behaviours in emerging adulthood, and understanding how current behaviours influence risk and resilience so these can be targeted in interventions.

Dr Flett, what key areas have you focused on over the course of your career to date?

My main area of research is the study of perfectionism, a state that has been linked with anxiety, depression, suicide, health problems and earlier death.

Mapping pathways between maltreatment and alcohol abuse

Two psychologists based at **York University** and the **University of Toronto** are exploring issues ranging from perfectionism to adolescent substance use. Their research interests aligned in a key study into the mechanisms underlying the links between child maltreatment and alcohol problems in later life

UNTANGLING THE COMPLEX web of internal and external factors that lead to certain emotional states and outcomes is a difficult job. Human beings are complicated, and what motivates one person to behave in a certain way will likely yield totally different results in someone else.

For Toronto-based psychologists like Dr Gordon Flett from York University and Dr Abby Goldstein from the University of Toronto, getting to grips with these issues is an important means by which to help those who have undergone trauma or abuse.

UNDERSTANDING EMERGING ADULTS Goldstein's primary focus is the famously unstable time of one's life that is now referred to as 'emerging adulthood' – the period between adolescence and full-blown adulthood. "Although many individuals experience this developmental stage as a time of optimism and possibility, it is also a period of significant instability and many struggle during this time," she states.

This could even be deemed something of an understatement. Not only do emerging adults have high rates of alcohol and substance abuse,

but researchers have found that 75 per cent of mental health issues have their onset prior to the age of 24.

Unsurprisingly, childhood maltreatment can play a big role in contributing to the development of some of these challenges, and the mechanisms underlying this and other critical developmental factors are one of Goldstein's primary concerns. Crucially, however, she also wants to find out what factors promote resilience in those who triumph despite childhood adversity.

THE SEARCH FOR PERFECTION

Flett, too, is interested in why some people remain resilient while others crumble in the face of adversity. He also investigates some of the more unpleasant consequences of adverse conditions early in life.

One area that Flett has addressed extensively over the course of his career is perfectionism – an idea with many positive connotations, but one that in reality has a dark side. "Our work over the past two decades has illustrated that perfectionism is multidimensional and has both personal and interpersonal components," he explains. "We have also illustrated its role in poor outcomes in terms of health and wellbeing."

REASONS TO ESCAPE

The aligned but separate research interests of these two researchers came together in a study undertaken with Dr Christine Wekerle

Recently, my research has also focused on the psychology of mattering – the basic human need to feel important and significant. People who have been the targets of mistreatment are typically low in mattering and this can contribute to feelings of psychological distress.

I also explore the notion that some people are resilient, despite undergoing significant adversity. We are trying to highlight the concept of ‘interpersonal resilience’ (ie. bouncing back from less than optimal treatment by other people).

What are you working on at present, and what are the main objectives of these investigations?

AG: I have several projects underway, but two that I am currently completing involve explorations of a developmental model of risk and resilience for alcohol and other illicit drug use in emerging adulthood.

Specifically, I am exploring the ways in which early attachment representations contribute to difficulties with emotion regulation and interpersonal difficulties in emerging adulthood and, in turn, how these two individual difference factors contribute to alcohol and other drug use.

from McMaster University into the mechanisms underlying childhood factors and alcohol problems in later life.

While the link between these two issues is well-established, and may seem obvious to some, what was lacking was a better understanding of the pathways that lead emerging adults to substance abuse, having undergone childhood trauma. The key finding was that these young people tended to be broadly motivated by a desire to change their emotional state, but what this meant varied between men and women. Men sought excitement, while women wanted relief. “These findings emphasise the importance of assessing histories of child maltreatment and incorporating adaptive strategies for emotion regulation within addiction services,” summarises Goldstein.

IMPLEMENTING THE RESULTS

Goldstein has since conducted follow-up studies with other at-risk emerging adult groups, and presented the findings to everyone from child welfare staff to scientists and practitioners in an effort to support the promotion of resilience and emotion regulation training among youth, specifically when there is a history of childhood maltreatment.

With certain risks identified, her next step is to explore the role that parents can have in working with their emerging adult children to avoid problematic behaviours. “The ultimate goal of this research is to develop new strategies that prevent risk and

GF: My current research continues to explore the role of perfectionism in health and mental health problems. I am currently working on accumulated research that suggests reported exposure to maltreatment relates to perfectionism which, in turn, is associated with poor well-being.

What motivates you in your work?

GF: I focus on research that helps highlight and inform people about public health issues of importance; for instance, our recent 2014 paper on perfectionism and suicide received international coverage.

In my position as Director of the LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research at York, I follow the Centre’s mantra of producing ‘research that matters’ – meaning that which has clear relevance to the general public and to setting public policy.



promote wellness among emerging adults that can be used by a range of professionals and non-professionals, including parents,” she concludes.

As for Flett, he will continue his research into perfectionism while devoting just as much of his time to what he calls ‘the need to matter’. Most people would like to feel like they are significant in some way, and his research into not mattering – or ‘anti-mattering’ – examines how this leads to poor personal and relationship adjustment. “My primary goal is to continue seeing research translated into key preventive interventions,” he explains. With this in mind, in collaboration with York Region District School Board, Flett leads the research component of the Ontario Ministry of Education pilot programme to promote resilience among children and adolescent. Clearly, getting to the roots of unpleasant issues can have big impacts on the development of a positive healthy society.

Researchers have found that 75 per cent of mental health issues have their onset prior to the age of 24

RISK/RESILIENCE FOR HIGH RISK BEHAVIOURS IN THE CONTEXT OF MALTREATMENT

OBJECTIVES

- To explore the role of perfectionism in health and mental health problems
- To explore a developmental model of risk and resilience for alcohol and other illicit drug use in emerging adulthood

KEY COLLABORATORS

Dr Sherry Stewart; Dr Sean Mackinnon, Dalhousie University, Canada • **Dr Natalie Vilhena-Churchill**, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Canada • **Dr Christine Wekerle**, McMaster University, Canada

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DR GORDON FLETT is most recognised for his seminal contributions to research and theory on the role of perfectionism in psychopathology. His collaborative work with Dr Paul Hewitt of the University of British Columbia on perfectionism has received widespread national and international attention and has been the subject of numerous media stories, including coverage on CTV, CNN, and the BBC. This work has been supported by major research grants from the CIHR and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.



DR ABBY GOLDSTEIN is a clinical psychologist and an associate professor in the Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development. Her research explores substance use and other risk behaviours during emerging adulthood a critical period of developmental and psychological transition and a time of both challenge and possibility. This work has been supported by major research grants from the Ontario Problem Gambling Research Centre, the Foundation for Alcohol Research (ABMRF), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and an Early Researcher Award from the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation.

