

# Parenting Stress and Mental Health in Early Midlife Adults: Evaluating the Role of Gender

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**INTRODUCTION**

- Parenthood can be a major source of stress in early midlife. High levels of parenting stress may reflect parents' at-risk mental health status that can have adverse consequences for long-term psychological health trajectories. Although extensive studies document the impact of parenting stress on their children, much less is known about the consequences for parents themselves.
- Moreover, past research indicates that U.S. mothers are more likely than fathers to spend greater time with children and caregiving. We examine the effects of parenting stress on mental health for both mothers and fathers in early midlife.

**HYPOTHESES**

**H1:** Higher levels of parenting stress will be associated with greater depressive and anxiety symptoms.

**H2:** Mothers will report higher levels of parenting stress and greater depressive and anxiety symptoms compared to fathers.

**METHODS Data Source:** Colorado Adoption/Twin Study of Lifespan behavioral development and cognitive aging (CATSLife) (*N* = 540)

**Measures:** Parenting stress (Parental Stress Scale; Berry & Jones, 1995) and depressive and anxiety symptoms (MASQ; Watson & Clark, 1991) were measured using online surveys. **Analytic Approach:** Multilevel models to account for family clustering were used to test (a) the association between parenting stress and depressive and anxiety symptoms, respectively; (b) the interaction between parenting stress and gender on depressive and anxiety symptoms, respectively. All models control for age, gender, education, race/ethnicity, health, child age, and # of living children.

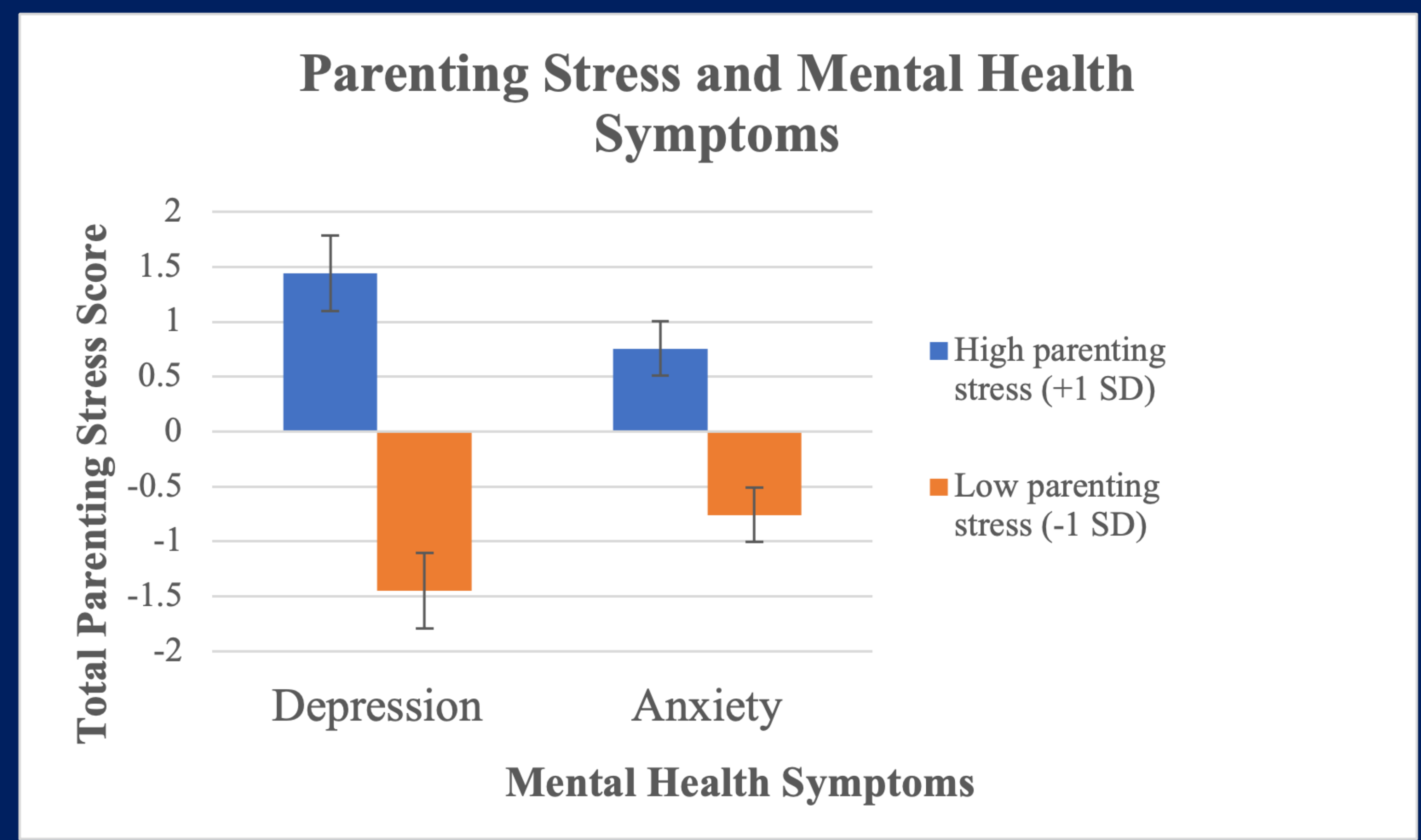
**RESULTS**

- Higher levels of parenting stress were associated with greater depressive ( $B = 0.52 (0.12), p < .001$ ) and anxiety symptoms ( $B = 0.27 (0.09), p < .01$ ).
- Reports of feeling less happy and more overwhelmed in the parenting role were significantly associated with higher levels of depressive (see Fig. 2) and anxiety (see Fig. 3) symptoms.
- Feeling less close to their children was also significantly associated with greater levels of depressive symptoms (see Fig. 2).
- These effects were consistent across mothers and fathers.

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# Both mothers and fathers who feel more stressed in the parental role are more likely to experience greater levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms in early midlife.

Fig. 1



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**Table 1**  
Sample Descriptives (*N* = 540)

Variables	Mean	SD	Range
Age	34.89	4.93	28-49
Education <sup>a</sup>	2.67	0.99	0-4
Parenting stress	7.43	2.80	4-20
# of living children	1.85	0.88	1-6
<b>Child age</b>			
Age of firstborn	7.68	5.47	0-28
Age of youngest	4.77	4.20	0-22
<b>Parental mental health</b>			
Depressive symptoms	20.38	7.94	12-55
Anxiety symptoms	17.34	5.72	11-44
	<b>Proportions</b>		
Female	.58		
Non-Hispanic White	.91		
Married	.78		

Note. <sup>a</sup>Rated from 0 = less than high school, 1 = high school, 2 = some college, 3 = college, and 4 = more than college.

Fig 2. Estimated Depression Scores for High vs. Low Scores on Individual Parenting Items

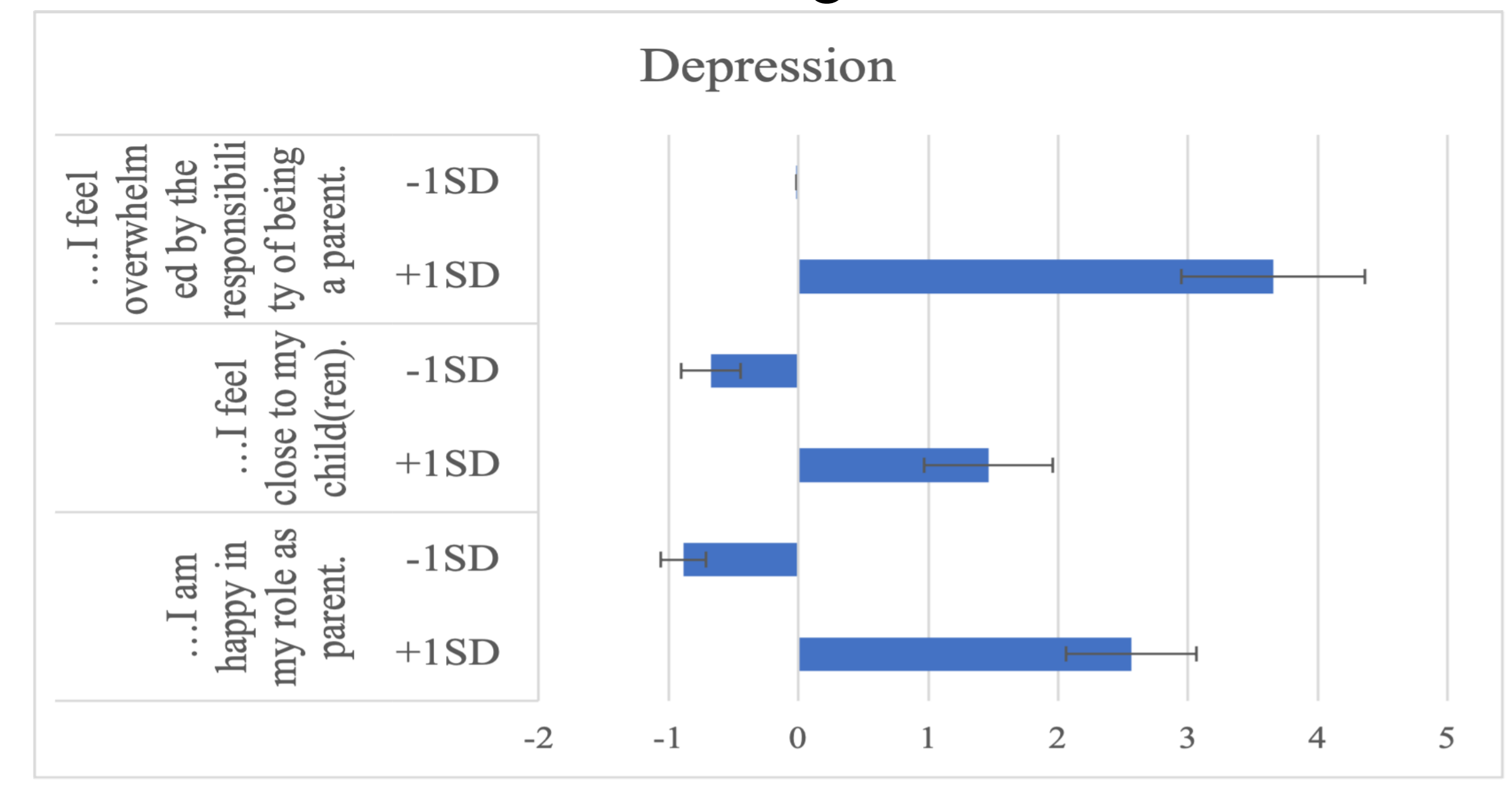
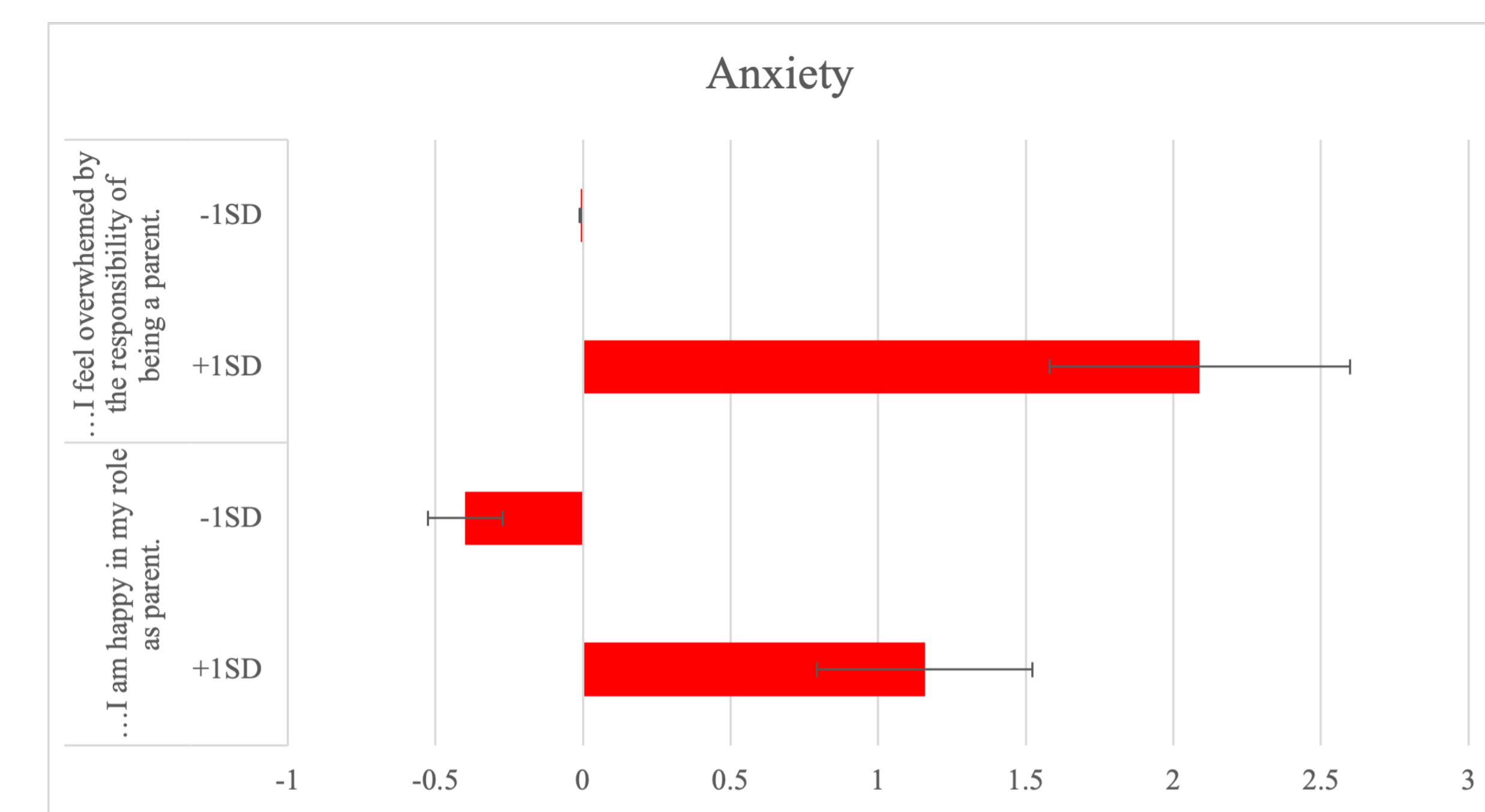


Fig 3. Estimated Anxiety Scores for High vs. Low Scores on Individual Parenting Items



**DISCUSSION**

Parenting stress was associated with both depressive and anxiety symptoms. Despite potential gender differences in the types of family responsibilities, findings suggest that both mothers and fathers experience similar mental health symptoms when under parenting stress. Future studies could examine potential resources that may buffer these negative effects for both mothers and fathers prior to late life.

