

ALERT TOP STORY

UVa research: Intense teen romance can lead to high blood pressure as an adult

Bryan McKenzie Jun 19, 2021 0



Tears and revenge are not the only things that may come from a bad romance; teens in intense relationships may find themselves battling high blood pressure as adults.

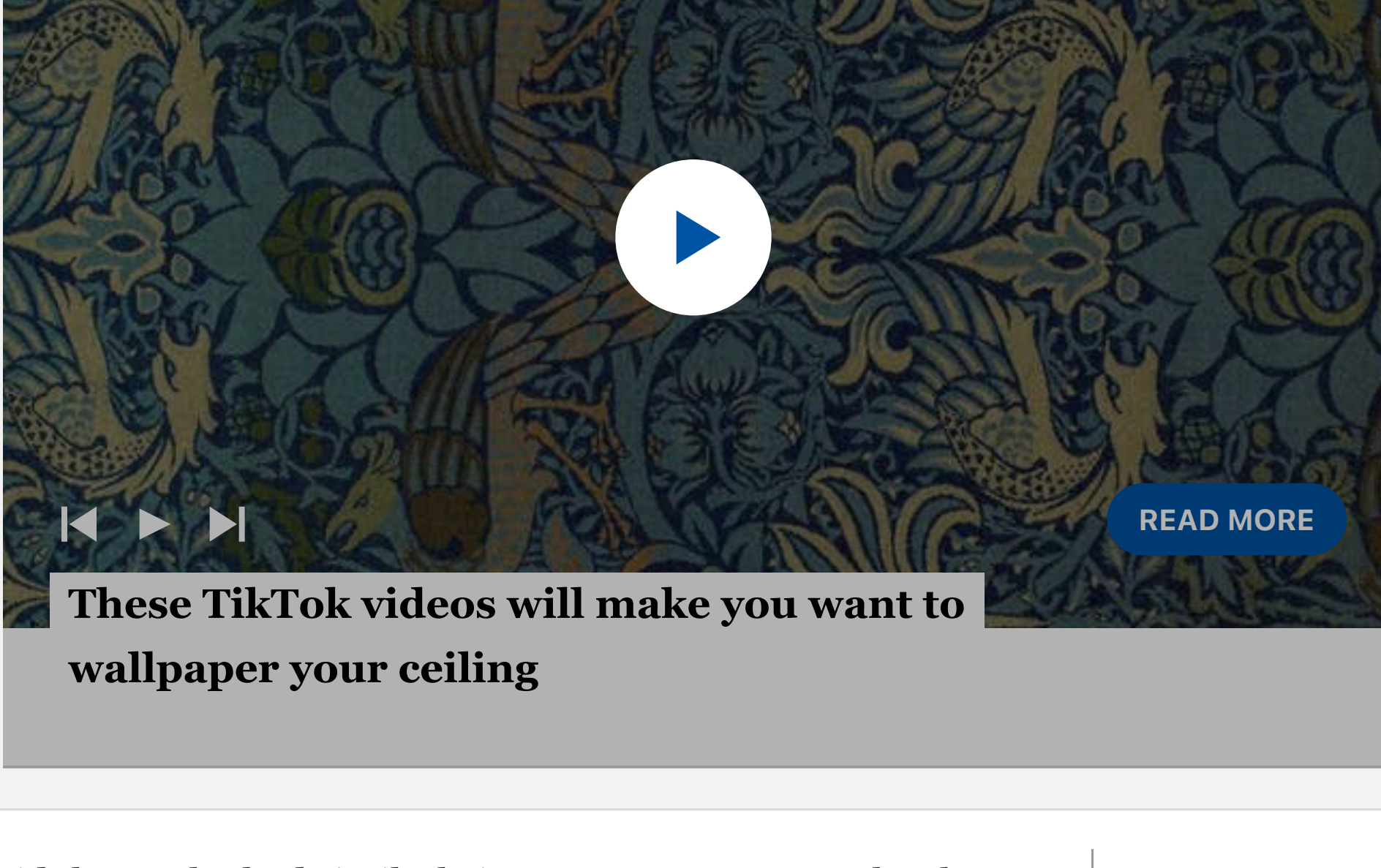
Data from an ongoing study of 184 Buford Middle School students that began in 1998 shows a direct, self-reported correlation between intense teen romantic relationships and high blood pressure as adults.

"Intense romantic relationships may be particularly problematic for adolescents as their relative immaturity and inexperience may make it harder for them to cope with the psychological demands of such relationships," states the study, printed in the May edition of The Journal of Development and Psychology, published by Cambridge University Press.

The findings are among the latest from Joseph Allen, a University of Virginia psychology professor, and his research team. The research was conducted with help from the University of Utah's psychology department.

Allen and his team checked in with 146 of the Buford study participants when they turned 17 and 19 to learn about their romantic relationships. Later, as the participants reached 29 and 31, they recorded respondents' blood pressure.

"One of things we found was the extent to which these relationships took kids away from their friends, their same-gender peers, had a big impact on their health as adults," Allen said. "In high school, I think we all had friends who got into romantic relationships and then you never saw them again because they spent all of their time with their partner. Those are the people we're talking about."



Conversely, Allen said those who had similarly intense teen romances but kept contact with their friends and peers did not have high blood pressure later.

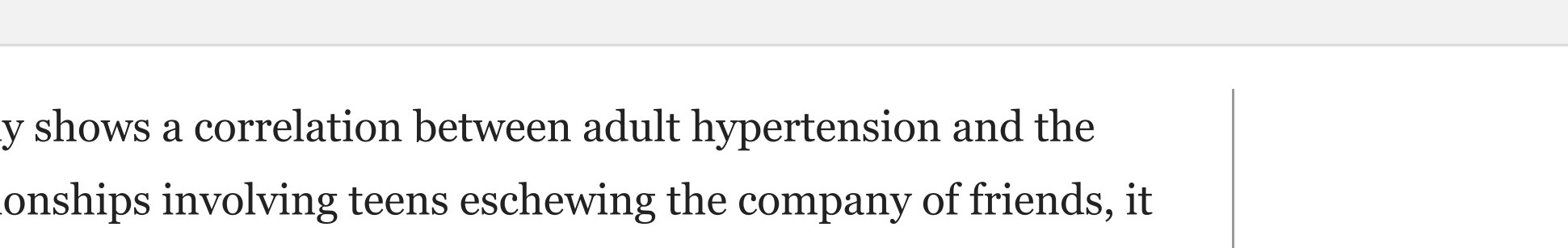
"It suggests an enmeshing relationship where your partner is saying, 'what do you mean you don't want to spend every moment of the day with me?' It also predicts having that same type of relationship in adulthood and fewer relationships with others outside of the relationship," he said.

For the teens, a bad romance was more than going gaga over a partner or the emotional impact of a collapsing relationship.

"For adolescents, most of their relationships feel intense, so that word may be misleading," Allen explained. "What we looked at were relationships in which kids spent large amounts of time alone with their partner over very long periods of time. These are relationships where kids got really swept up to the point of ignoring other interests and their friends. It's a relationship that sucked up their time and energy to a point that our data suggests was unhealthy."

The study showed that highly time-consuming romances, in terms of absorbing time each day and over a period of weeks and months, likely crowd out other relationships and increase a sense of high-stakes interest in maintaining that relationship, even as it deteriorates.

"The result is a formative experience of relationships as emotionally overwhelming, potentially autonomy-threatening and even, ironically, isolating," the study states.



Although the study shows a correlation between adult hypertension and the intense teen relationships involving teens eschewing the company of friends, it does not show a causal link.

So exactly why the bad romance leads to higher blood pressure is not known. Allen's team has some educated explanations, however, and the big one is the emotional stress of the relationship and the way it could set the teen up for behavior in future relationships.

An especially intense relationship, Allen said, can create a stress response to relationships that lasts into adulthood.

"If you are in that kind of a relationship in adolescence and it ends, you are devastated because you gave your whole life for that person and now that person is gone," he said. "How we deal with stress often gets locked in to a degree during our teen years, and we believe that's part of what's going on."

According to the study, the idea is that stress at a vulnerable stage of development may have long-term physical health implications, even if the stress does not continue.

"In line with this perspective, several recent studies have now linked problematic parental, friend and romantic relationships in adolescence to longer-term health difficulties in ways that appeared relatively unmediated by future relationship qualities," the study states.

Teens who have a bad romance at 17 will be gun shy when approaching future relationships, with the same emotions, intensity and stress reappearing as something of a learned response, Allen said.

"First relations set up a template. We find regular relationships with peers will be impacted, as well," he said. "If our first relationships are bad, it colors our view of what the world is going to be like. What happens in adolescence is a predictive indicator of what is going to happen in adult life."

Often teens who find themselves with controlling romantic partners also have controlling parents who make the teens feel guilty for breaking rules, Allen suggests. That also impacts them into adulthood.

"Consideration of the potential effects of intense romantic relationships naturally leads to the corollary question of why adolescents would be initially drawn to them," the study states. "The most plausible explanation suggests that an inclination toward intensity would be most likely for adolescents who had grown accustomed to intense and autonomy-impinging relationships in their family of origin."

"You go from an overly controlling family to a controlling relationship," Allen said.

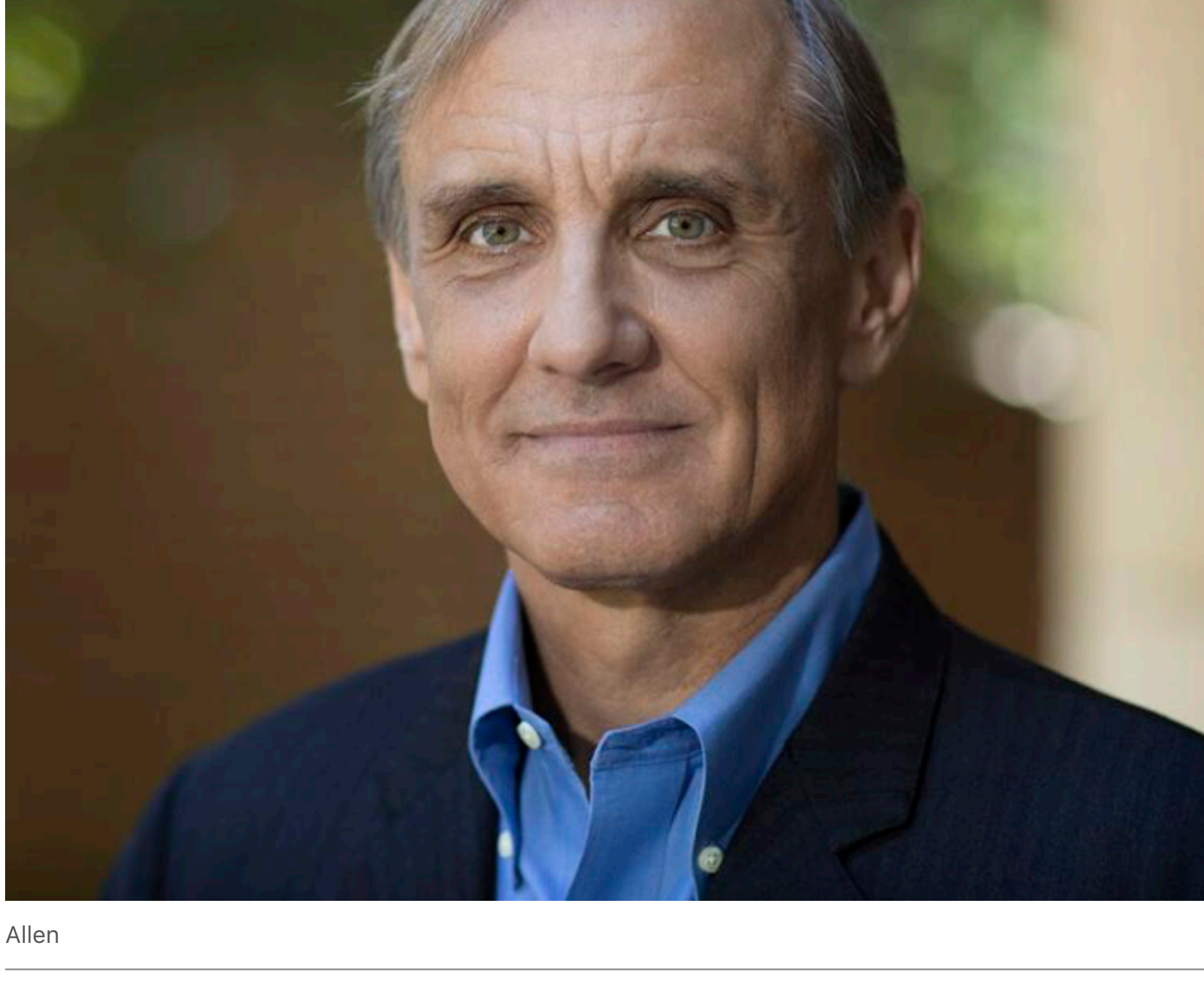
Participants also reported issues forming friendships as young adults.

"They had friendships where there was a lot of conflict," Allen said. "It's like they didn't learn how to develop close friendships. Having relationships not go well is one of the more stressful things that humans experience, because we are such pack animals."



Allen's study of the Buford students has led to several important findings since it began. It showed that extreme stress during the teen years can lead to premature aging. Another indicated that healthy teen friendships predict healthy adult romances.

One result also noted that the cool teen crowd in school often walked a rough road into adulthood. By 22, the cool crowd members were rated by their peers as less competent in managing social relationships, more likely to have had significant problems with alcohol or drugs and more likely to have engaged in criminal activities.



Allen

0 comments

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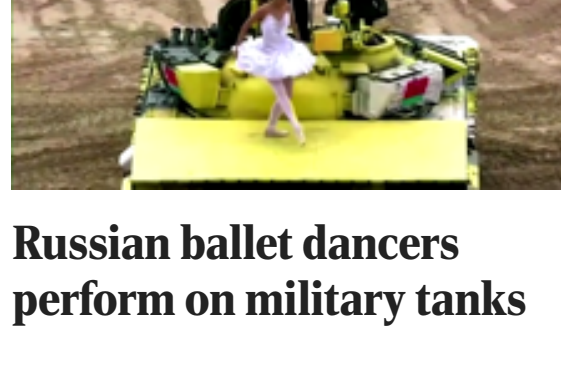
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