

The Relationship between Childhood Emotional Abuse and Neglect and Depression and Anxiety among Adults

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ABSTRACT

The existing research in literature indicates that experiences of any form of child abuse can be devastating and have long-term consequences on the mental health outcomes of children and carry into adulthood. However, there is limited research on the relationship between different types of child abuse and the unique effects that such experiences can have on the mental health of adults. The research on the consequences of emotional abuse and emotional neglect is scarce. The present study examines the relationship between childhood experiences of emotional abuse and emotional neglect and depression and anxiety among adults. A secondary analysis of the data was completed on data from the Refresher Biomarker Project, which is the fourth project in the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study survey. There was a total of 863 participants, who ranged in ages 25 to 74. Participants were sent recruitment packets and eligible participants were assigned to one of three clinical sites, located at three different universities. The results indicated that childhood experiences of emotional abuse were associated with increased levels of depression and anxiety in adulthood. Additionally, childhood experiences of emotional neglect were associated with an increased likelihood of anxiety. The findings from the present study emphasize the need for an increase in research on mental health outcomes that are largely derived from experiences of emotional abuse and emotional neglect in childhood.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Study:

- Despite the plethora of existing research on the consequences of child abuse, the complexities of emotional abuse and emotional neglect are often overlooked and undermined. There is limited research regarding the long-term consequences of childhood emotional abuse and emotional neglect on the mental well-being of adults.

Purpose of the Research:

- The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between childhood experiences of emotional abuse and emotional neglect and depression and anxiety among adults.

Research Question:

- “What is the relationship between childhood experiences of emotional abuse and emotional neglect and depression and anxiety among adults?”

Hypothesis:

- Individuals who were subjected to emotional abuse and emotional neglect as children are more likely to experience depression and anxiety in adulthood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Research indicates that a lowered sense of self-worth is correlated with childhood experiences of emotional abuse and neglect, which can contribute to mistrust, fear of intimacy, and a persistent sense of a threat to one's security in childhood (Salva et al., 2013). Consequently, the latter increases the risk of individuals experiencing anxiety and chronic depression in adulthood.
- Individuals with a prior history of emotional abuse and emotional neglect are more likely to report difficulties in their interpersonal relationships than individuals without a history of emotional abuse and neglect. These individuals are more likely to experience isolation and loneliness (Reyome, 2010).
- Consistent to the premise of the Attachment Theory, research shows that childhood emotional abuse has a negative impact on adults and their feelings of closeness to their family, which affects their future relationships and social skills (Savla et al., 2013).
- A lack of emotional affection and warmth from family members has been linked to anxiety disorders. Studies have shown that participants suffering from severe generalized anxiety disorders experienced more rejection from their parents and took on the role of being “parentified children.” (Schimmenti & Bifulco, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

- The present study is a secondary data analysis of the data that was collected from the Refresher Biomarker Project, which is the fourth project in a series of five different projects. The Refresher Biomarker Project gathered baseline data from a total of 863 different respondents (n=746 Main sample, n=117 African-Americans from Milwaukee) to “fulfill the original MIDUS 1 baseline” sample.
- The Refresher Biomarker Project mirrors the second project in the five-project series, which examined the relationship between behavioral and psychosocial factors with biological regulation and dysregulation.

Sample and Sampling Method

- The study was funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network and the National Institute of Aging.
- The sample size for the study was collected at three different data collection sites: UCLA, the University of Washington, and Georgetown University.
- The total sample size consisted of 863 participants.
- Eligible participants were recruited through a two-step process: Staff members at each of the three Clinical Research Units sent participants recruitment packets. The participants were asked for their verbal consent over the phone and their written consent was taken during their Clinical Research Unit site visit. Participants were assigned to visit one of the three clinical sites to participate in the project. The data for the study was collected over the course of a 24-hour period during which participants completed an overnight stay at the Clinical Research Unit site.
- Upon their arrival, participants were asked to complete a medication chart, their medical history, a Self-Administered Questionnaire, the Pittsburgh Sleep Questionnaire, a shorter version of a physical exam where their vital signs were taken, and the beginning of a 12-hour urine collection.
- On the second day, participants were asked to complete the 12-hour urine collection, a fasting blood draw, the psychophysiology experimental protocol, and a shorter version of a physical exam where participants' functional abilities were assessed. Participants were also asked to complete a bone and muscle function assessment, a Gait assessment, and the Ankle Brachial Index Assessment.

Measures

Independent Variables: Childhood Experiences of Emotional Abuse and Emotional Neglect

- The independent variables of experiences of emotional abuse and emotional neglect were measured using the self-report Childhood Trauma Questionnaire.

Dependent Variables: Depression and Anxiety among Adults

- The dependent variables of depression and anxiety among adults were measured using the self-report Mood and Anxiety Symptoms Questionnaire.

Variables	n	%
<i>Independent Variables</i>		
CTQ: Emotional Abuse	M = 8.24	SD = 4.15
CTQ: Emotional Neglect	M = 9.93	SD = 4.59
<i>Dependent Variables</i>		
MASQ: General Distress Depressive Symptoms	M = 18.63	SD = 6.33
MASQ: General Distress Anxious Symptoms	M = 16.70	SD = 4.88

RESULTS

- A Pearson's correlation was utilized four different times to analyze the relationship between the two independent variables and two dependent variables.
- Positive statistically significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and depression, $r(859) = .31, p < .05$
- Positive statistically significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and anxiety, $r(859) = .25, p < .05$
- Positive statistically significant relationship between childhood emotional neglect and depression, $r(859) = .19, p < .05$
- Positive statistically significant relationship between emotional neglect and anxiety, $r(859) = .12, p < .05$

Independent and Dependent Variables	r	df	p
Childhood Emotional Abuse and Depression	.31	859	.000
Childhood Emotional Abuse and Anxiety	.25	859	.000
Childhood Emotional Neglect and Depression	.19	859	.000
Childhood Emotional Neglect and Anxiety	.12	859	.000

DISCUSSION

Summary Findings

- The results gathered from the inferential analyses indicated that there were significant associations between childhood experiences of emotional abuse and depression and anxiety among adults, as well as childhood experiences of emotional neglect and anxiety.
- Although the relationship between childhood experiences of emotional neglect and depression among adults was statistically significant, the results showed that lower levels of depression were noted among adults who had experienced emotional neglect as children.

Implications for Research and Practice

- The present study aimed to bridge the gaps in research by exploring the different ways in which experiences of childhood emotional abuse and emotional neglect affect a victim depending on the relationship that they have with the perpetrator.
- The overall results suggest that there is a pressing need to explore different mental health outcomes in association with emotional abuse and emotional neglect in childhood.
- The long-term effects of emotional abuse and emotional neglect cannot be easily detected by simply examining the contents of a child's room or marks on their body. The subtle but toxic effects of emotional abuse and emotional neglect make it increasingly important for social workers and those alike to be aware of the different needs that victims will have as a result of traumatic experiences.
- Social workers should be trained to detect the early signs and symptoms of emotional abuse and emotional neglect so that they can provide prevention or early intervention with the victim and family members.

Strengths and Limitations

- A significant limitation found in the present study was the use of self-administered questionnaires. Because participants were responsible for self-reporting, it is necessary that the study's findings also consider the possibility of social desirability bias and inaccurate reporting.
- Another limitation is that abuse is a sensitive topic and participants may have felt a certain degree of discomfort or dissociation from their experiences, which affected the way that they answered questions.
- The findings from the present study provides empirical support to social workers who are interested in conducting more extensive research on early interventions and practices that can help children who are victims of and continue to experience emotional abuse and neglect.

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