

ENDURING SCARS: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF THE LONG-TERM PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF CHILD MALTREATMENT

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Abstract

The aim of this literature review was to examine the relationship between individuals who experienced childhood abuse and the likelihood of developing a mental health disorder later in life. By analyzing an assortment of peer-reviewed journal articles and studies that geared towards the effects of childhood maltreatment, it uncovered how there is a correlation with long-term mental health disorders emerging in individuals who fell victim to childhood abuse. Key findings entail how childhood sexual, physical, psychological, and emotional abuse are linked to an increased likelihood of developing disorders such as phobias, OCD, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, PTSD, and more. It was also observed how there were physical health symptoms interconnected with the mental being of the individual including cardiovascular disease, asthma, chronic pain, systemic lupus erythematosus, and others. Another main finding was the kinds of treatment options for people suffering due to the abuse. Successful treatment options were trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, brief eclectic psychotherapy, eye movement desensitization, and self-compassion therapy, but there is no specific evidence that informs which interventions are the better choice.

Keywords

Child Abuse, Mental Health, Child Maltreatment, Childhood Abuse, Childhood Physical Abuse, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Childhood Physical Abuse, Childhood Psychological Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Childhood Trauma, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Child abuse is a violent crime that can physically, socially, or psychologically affect victims during childhood, and into adulthood due to the traumatic ramifications. This literature review will underline the relationship between individuals who experience childhood abuse and the likelihood of developing a mental health disorder later in life. Victims of childhood maltreatment are at greater risk of developing mental disorders or other mental issues because of the psychological impact on the individuals. While the offender is responsible for the crime committed, society has a responsibility to help support and empower the victim. That is also why organizations and programs aimed towards child maltreatment can be beneficial when used properly along with other treatments and interventions.

Child abuse is an offense that innocent children can encounter. Child abuse is defined as any action by a parent or caretaker, that harms or could impair the health of a child physically, sexually, or psychologically (Liveri et al., 2023). Alhussaini and Riaz claimed child abuse as any form of physical, emotional, sexual, or neglectful treatment of youngsters as well as other exploitation (2021). Xiao et al., defined child abuse as all forms of abuse that result in possible or actual harm to a child's physical or psychological health (Xiao et al., 2021). As a result, child abuse is an action that harms the health of a child physically and psychologically, which can also alter lifelong development.

Research has also helped analyze how childhood abuse is a global issue in today's society. According to Chung and Chen, in China, child abuse prevalence among adolescents ranged from seventeen to seventy-one percent (2020). That means that child abuse has a wide range of impacts depending on factors like demographics, the type of maltreatment that occurred, and how people define or recognize childhood maltreatment. Sánchez-Jáuregui et al., (2023) found that in Mexico, child abuse and neglect have victimized around sixty-three percent of the population, with some research showing rates as high as eighty percent. The Center for Surveillance and Applied Research, also discovered thirty-four percent of Canadians under the age of 15 years old are suspected of

experiencing child abuse or maltreatment (2020). However, research that was conducted with participants from the United States, Finland, Germany, Belgium, India, Switzerland, and South Africa, commented how physical and emotional abuse shared the highest threat followed by physical and emotional neglect (Matsumoto et al., 2023). These findings confirm how sexual, physical, emotional, and neglectful childhood abuse is a lingering threat in today's society that is affecting individuals worldwide.

Disorders

Childhood maltreatment may contribute to some reasons why particular adults might develop mental health conditions during their grown-up years. Liveri et al., discovered that there is an increased risk for females to build phobia disorder, OCD, anxiety disorder, and depression if they experience childhood maltreatment (2023). Childhood abuse could also cause long-standing upregulation of attentional vigilance circuits which makes one more at risk of having anxiety-related symptoms (Harb et al., 2024). Alhussaini and Riaz noted how post-traumatic stress disorder is more frequent in adults who experienced sexual or physical abuse in their childhood compared to adults who were not abused (2021). It can be concluded that childhood abuse is connected to an increased likelihood of a victim acquiring various mental health disorders due to the detrimental trauma they endured.

Exposure to childhood abuse also correlates with adults developing eating disorders later in life. Results from one study claimed that there was a strong connection between child abuse of all types and females developing eating disorders in adulthood: binge-eating disorder, bulimia nervosa, and anorexia nervosa (Liveri et al., 2023). Another study emphasized how specifically physical and emotional abuse can cause one to be at high risk of developing eating disorders (Eielsen et al., 2024). Hanson and Wallis claimed that children who fall victim to sexual abuse are more likely to develop posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, or psychosis (Hanson & Wallis, 2018). That discovery helps clarify how eating disorders are more likely to form after abuse has occurred, rather than as a short-term effect. This gathered information helps bring awareness to one distinct extended mental disorder that can develop if an individual falls victim to childhood maltreatment.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is one form of maltreatment that is important to address because of the commonality it has in the world today. Childhood sexual abuse affects around eight to thirty-one percent of girls and three to seventeen percent of boys all over the world (Wanni Arachchige Dona et al., 2024). Winter et al., found there were approximately sixty thousand children in the United States who suffered from sexual victimization (2020). Another article even warned how after a natural disaster, emergency housing increased the risk of sexual abuse, especially for girls (Seddighi et al., 2021). This data implies that while sexual abuse influences a portion of girls, there tends to be an increased risk during traumatic events like natural disasters, which could put a greater amount of individuals at risk during those circumstances.

Since there is a high commonality rate of childhood sexual abuse occurring, then that also endangers those victims to suffer long-term effects from the maltreatment. Research addressing women noted how sexual childhood trauma might lead to a higher risk for a victim to develop PTSD, anxiety, depression, OCD, phobias, and other psychiatric symptoms (Liveri et al., 2023). Kerlin and Sosin, who conducted a small study that also focused on women who experienced childhood sexual abuse, identified how the women showed symptoms of migraines, anorexia, bulimia, flashbacks, anxiety, suicide attempts, depression, body image dysphoria, insomnia, substance abuse, and others (Kerlin & Sosin, 2017). Long-term childhood sexual abuse effects verify that there is an association between various psychological disturbances because of the detrimental childhood abuse that transpired.

Physical Abuse

Childhood physical abuse is another type of maltreatment that directly impacts victims along with those around them. Smit et al., found the effects of childhood physical neglect on males who had first-episode schizophrenia, could influence poorer premorbid social functioning in early adolescence which may contribute to the development of schizophrenia or other neurodevelopmental issues (2021). When children are exposed to physical abuse at such a crucial developmental stage, it can affect the way the amygdala interacts with the nervous system, creating an increased likelihood of one forming psychiatric disorders or being at risk for committing suicide or self-harm (Campbell, 2022). Another analysis made sure to acknowledge how physical abuse was the most common type of maltreatment that led to hospitalization for children, which is estimated at around seventy-three million annually (Wojciak et al., 2021). There are lengthy psychological harm and financial repercussions for both victims and society as a result of the physical neglect and abuse that impacted multiple dimensions of the human body.

Psychological and Emotional Abuse

Childhood psychological and emotional abuse is challenging to evaluate, as it is difficult to quantify the extent of harm directed to the victim, but the consequences are frightening. Emotional abuse in early life might be an indicator for someone to develop issues of dealing with uncertainty later on which then places them at higher risk

of developing social and generalized anxiety disorders, eating disorders, health anxiety, OCD, panic disorder, and substance use disorders (Dirican et al., 2023). Xaio et al., suggest that childhood psychological maltreatment is connected to mental health issues that persist to adulthood such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and more (2021). However, Gama et al., claimed that emotional abuse still needs to be inspected more, but by understanding its effects, then people might be able to prevent the consequences of the abuse (2021). These findings conclude that childhood psychological and emotional abuse might contribute to inferior mental health issues in the future. However, additional exploration must be accomplished to confirm negative developments growing.

Other Consequences That Develop

Childhood abuse can even be linked to other issues that may develop in an individual as a result of the traumatic incident. One study found that childhood trauma was associated with negative symptoms in early adulthood as well as adolescence which places individuals at a higher clinical risk for psychosis (Ayawvi et al., 2023). Child abuse might cause psychological symptoms like alexithymia and behavioral issues such as delinquency, aggression, and disruptive behavior (Chung & Chen, 2020). These facts indicate those who are victims of child abuse are at a higher risk of formulating other mental issues that can impact their future behavior.

Childhood maltreatment also has financial repercussions not only for individuals but for society as a whole. A study noted how the United States government payers help cover over seventy percent of the hospital costs related to child maltreatment which is estimated to be around one point four billion dollars from the timeframe of 2001-2016 alone (Wojciak et al., 2021). Another study mentioned how families affected by natural disasters, especially families in lower socioeconomic conditions, face greater pressures which might lead to violence against children more frequently (Seddighi et al., 2021). Based on this research, a large portion of American taxpayers' money is spent on hospital costs due to childhood maltreatment, and families in lower socioeconomic conditions are at a greater risk of experiencing violence against children.

Mental Health Affects Physical Health

Child abuse influences not only the victim's mental well-being but also their physical health, as both are interconnected. Child maltreatment can cause physical health issues such as heart problems and obesity (Dierickx et al., 2023). Victims report suffering from physical symptoms that were related to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and sexually transmitted infections (Mathews et al., 2021). Liveri et al., found a connection between physical and sexual abuse-inducing issues in women such as chronic pain, cardiovascular diseases, sleep disorders, asthma, systemic lupus erythematosus, and more (2023). From these observations, it can be concluded that the impact of child abuse can influence a person's long-term well-being and quality of life.

The long-term effects of childhood maltreatment may vary depending on the abuse that occurred, the timeframe of the abuse occurring, and the age of the victim, among other factors. It is important to acknowledge the extended consequences of the victimization. Liveri et al., found long-term effects such as personality disorders, prolonged anxiety disorders, and other emotional issues (2023). Additionally, an individual who experienced one form of childhood maltreatment has a greater likelihood of experiencing another type of abuse (Dierickx et al., 2023). Rosso found if a parent was victimized as a child and has their own children, then there should be early intervention to break the cycle (2022), but it's important to note that not all parents who were abused are abusers (2022). These conclusions imply that childhood abuse may be accountable for long-term mental disorders in victims and should be considered as a factor when scrutinizing generational trauma.

Wide Range of Treatment Options

A broad variety of treatment options are available to help people who have experienced childhood abuse and wish to seek treatment for their mental health. Data has shown positive outcomes for self-compassion therapy for people who suffer from developing eating disorders or post-traumatic stress disorder after abuse (Eielsen et al., 2024). A different study found how group and trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy are promising for sexual assault victims, but if a child has just experienced abuse it is better to place them into therapy so they can process the trauma with tools of expressive art, play, drama, sensory, superhero/comic, music, and movement interventions (Shuman et al., 2022). While research provides details on some successful treatment options for victims of child abuse, it is important to note how each survivor may respond differently to various interventions and approaches need to be tailored to the individual.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a common mental illness that develops from childhood abuse, but there is a considerable number of therapies that can help assist victims. Interpersonal therapy, brief eclectic psychotherapy, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, reprocessing, eye movement desensitization, and others have been proven to help minimize PTSD symptoms (Alhussaini & Riaz, 2021). A study by Caro et al. (2023) found that there is some evidence that CBT might be more beneficial when it comes to reducing symptoms of PTSD, but there is no evidence found for the most effective therapy for PTSD. This information acknowledges how there are

interventions and therapies to help suffering victims with PTSD, but there is no specific evidence that implies which therapeutic intervention is the best choice.

Impact

Another factor to consider when examining the treatment of childhood abuse is the spirituality of a person. Fitzgerald and Berthiaume found that adults who were maltreated in their childhood might find spirituality as a source of resilience, but some might turn against it (2022). Kerlin and Sosin noted that people who experienced childhood sexual abuse might abandon their faith, but they may even develop a spiritual awakening or rebirth (2017). This research, helps distinguish how one's spirituality can either benefit or detriment a victim of childhood abuse during treatment, but further research should be accomplished for confirmation.

Perspective is a powerful tool that each individual carries with them throughout life, but it can have a positive or negative effect. People could have a negative view of God due to their depressive and anxious moods as well as their subjective well-being (Kerlin & Sosin, 2017). Fitzgerald and Berthiaume disclosed how engaging in spiritual practices like prayer, meditation, scripture reading, and so on were found helpful in healing from the psychological hurt of childhood maltreatment, but some individuals did not find it useful since they felt like they were abandoned or unworthy from God (2022). These findings show that if a victim has a positive spiritual perspective after childhood maltreatment it can help the individual during the recovery process, while a negative spiritual perspective may only reinforce undesirable emotions during the recovery process.

Childhood abuse might influence an individual's gender differently in terms of the development of future mental disorders. Cavanaugh et al., discovered that females are at a higher risk for attempting suicide and developing substance use disorders if exposed to childhood abuse or cumulative trauma (2025). Fitzgerald and Berthiaume highlighted how spirituality is a buffer for the effects of childhood abuse on mental health, specifically for women in midlife, but for men in midlife, there was a relationship found between spirituality and loneliness (2022). However, findings have shown how childhood abuse affects both genders the same, but the level of abuse that occurs may affect the severity of the symptoms that develop psychologically and behaviourally (Chung & Chen, 2020). Overall, these findings suggest a possible link between gender differences and particular consequences of abuse, but further research needs to be concluded.

Since childhood maltreatment is a universal crime, several programs and organizations worldwide strive to educate the general public about child abuse, as well as offer support to survivors. Some child maltreatment programs in hospitals include the *Triple P-Positive Parenting Program* while *The World Health Organization* and *The International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect* both focus on helping children who have experienced abuse (Wojciak et al., 2021). Another organization, *Trauma-informed care*, focuses on the widespread trauma along with how it impacts direct and secondary victims (Dierickx et al., 2023). Everley acknowledged *The National Governing Body* as an organization in the United Kingdom that is focused on meeting standards for the safety and protection of children who are in sports (2020). These programs and organizations are just a few examples of associations that raise awareness regarding child maltreatment and work to protect current and possible victims.

Future Directions

Child abuse has long been a concern, yet there are still unmet needs for victims when providing treatment and helping individuals cope with the trauma. Research has addressed how clinicians should consider demographic differences when it comes to helping victims form strategies to cope with uncertainty (Dirican et al., 2023). Kerlin and Sosin emphasized how treatment planning should be done from a perspective that includes a biological, psychological, social, and spiritual view of people who have co-occurring disorders and child sexual abuse history, that involves protocols to address relationships, self-image, and forgiveness issues within the victims (2017). These findings reveal how victims may struggle to cope with feelings of uncertainty and negative self-image, which generally influences their psychological functioning after the offense.

Additional research is also still needed across various components, which may illustrate why the long-term effects of childhood maltreatment have received less attention. Rosso claimed that few studies focus on individual psychoanalytic treatment (2022). There is no direct systematic review or meta-analysis addressing the long-term effects of childhood maltreatment on adult mental health outcomes (Xiao et al., 2021). Cavanaugh et al., noted that future research still needs to be completed along with clinical implications over sex/gender differences in trauma. (2025). Further research is needed on specific treatments, the influence of trauma on separate genders, and the long-term effects of childhood maltreatment into adulthood, to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the victimization.

While existing programs help child abuse victims, there are still certain aspects that could be strengthened within those programs to help achieve additional support. Child protective policies at the national level must be strengthened with other emergency relief sectors like food, shelter, health, and more (Sedighi et al., 2021).

Wojciak et al., addressed how hospitals should work with community partners to help provide effective prevention programs to reduce child maltreatment (2021). Clinicians should also consider including spirituality as an adjunctive treatment for trauma-informed therapy (Fitzgerald & Berthiaume, 2022). Identifying areas where associations can focus their efforts to contribute to a more sufficient and significant support system for victims, then it has the opportunity to help decrease negative stigmas, taboos, or even consequences of the offense.

Research has provided a strong foundation on how child abuse has affected victims, but there are always other factors to consider when examining the bigger picture. For example, Liveri et al., have claimed that the extent of the person's trauma is unknown or in some cases the role of the abuser on an individual (2023). It has also been disclosed how childhood maltreatment may affect a participant's memory along the timing of maltreatment could alter outcomes (Harb et al., 2024). There are other external and internal factors to consider as well, but those findings help provide a widespread idea of what is still immeasurable during experiments or surveys to receive reliable and valid data.

Overall, childhood abuse is a victimization that causes emotional, psychological, and physiological damage. People who fall victim to this crime are at a higher risk of developing mental disorders or other mental health issues that can negatively influence their mental well-being. While there is treatment to help reduce symptoms each victim may react to treatment differently, and treatment seems to lack acknowledgment of the client as a whole being: physical, mental, and spiritual. It is also important to mention how survivors will process the trauma that occurred at their own pace, so there is no specific healing timeline. Some organizations and programs help bring awareness to this offense which also offer support to victims. Additionally, spirituality was shown to be beneficial during the healing stages depending on if the victim had a positive spiritual perspective. However, there still needs to be further research completed since there are a majority of limitations including the unknown extent of the person's trauma, the role of the abuser on the victim, and how the individual's memory may have been affected during the maltreatment. There are also still unmet needs of victims that need to be addressed within treatment, but more research needs to be completed for those components. Overall, it is significant to recognize that society needs to come together to help support and protect victims of childhood abuse by supplying proper resources to help decrease the negative consequences that are generated from the abuse. It is time for society to speak up for the rights of those who are struggling, and to stand up for those who may not be able to speak for themselves.

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