



Press release: European Congress of Psychiatry, Paris

## **Childhood trauma linked to adult mental health problems: women harmed more by abuse, men by neglect**

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Type of research: not peer reviewed/observational study/work on people<sup>1</sup>

A new study shows that men and women are affected differently by childhood trauma: women are more affected by childhood emotional trauma and sexual abuse, whereas men are more affected by childhood emotional and physical neglect.

Lead researcher, Dr Thanavadee Prachason (from the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands) said,

*“Our findings indicate that exposure to childhood maltreatment increases the risk of having psychiatric symptoms in both men and women. However, exposure to emotionally or sexually abusive experiences during childhood increases the risk of a variety of psychiatric symptoms particularly in women. In contrast, a history of emotional or physical neglect in childhood increases the risk of having psychiatric symptoms more in men.”*

This work, presented at the European Congress of Psychiatry in Paris, is the first systematic research to link the gender-specific effects of childhood and neglect with mental health outcomes.

An international team from the Netherlands, Turkey, Italy, Belgium, the UK, and the USA analysed data from 791 volunteers on trauma in their childhood. They were also tested for current psychiatric symptoms such as phobias, anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, interpersonal sensitivity, and other symptoms. The researchers were then able to associate the type of childhood trauma with the symptoms shown as adults.

They found that both men and women with a high score for childhood trauma were significantly more likely to show psychiatric symptoms as adults. The analysis showed that both men and women were affected by childhood emotional abuse, but that this association was around twice as strong in women as in men. “Women who had been sexually abused in childhood had more subsequent symptoms than those who hadn't, but this pattern wasn't found in men.

In contrast, childhood neglect, both physical and emotional, were linked to later psychiatric symptoms in men, but not in women. Dr Prachason said, *“Physical neglect may include experiences of not having enough to eat, wearing dirty clothes, not getting taken care of, and not getting taken to the doctor when the person was growing up. Emotional neglect may include childhood experiences like not feeling loved or important, and not feeling close to the family”.*

Senior researcher, Professor Sinan Guloksuz (University of Maastricht) added, *“Childhood trauma is a widespread problem. It is difficult to gather accurate statistics, but a systematic review<sup>2</sup> estimated that up to 50% of children worldwide had suffered from trauma in the previous year. A number of studies have shown that childhood trauma contributes to a variety of mental health problems, and it is estimated<sup>3</sup> that, worldwide, around one-third of all psychiatric disorders are related to childhood trauma: childhood trauma is a leading preventable risk factor for mental illness”.*



Commenting, Professor Philip GORWOOD (Université de Paris, Institut Psychiatrie et Neurosciences de Paris) said:

*“This is an important finding, as childhood trauma has been clearly recognized as a major risk factor for the vast majority of psychiatric disorders, but with poor knowledge of gender specificities. Understanding which aspects of trauma are more damaging according to gender will facilitate research on the resilience process. Many intervention strategies will indeed benefit from a more personalized approach”.*

*Professor Gorwood is ex-President of the European Psychiatric Association. This is an independent contact, Professor Gorwood was not involved in this work.*

The European Congress of Psychiatry takes place from 25-28 March 2023, in Paris. It is Europe’s largest congress dedicated to psychiatry, with around 4500 attendees <https://epa-congress.org/>

As Dr Prachason is unable to attend the congress, the work will be presented in Paris by co-worker Dr Laura-Fusar-Poli (University of Pavia).

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## Notes

1. This has been added as part of a project by the Academy of Medical Sciences to improve communication in scientific press releases. Please see <https://tinyurl.com/5n7udm2e> for background.
2. Hillis S, Mercy J, Amobi A, Kress H. Global Prevalence of Past-year Violence Against Children: A Systematic Review and Minimum Estimates. *Pediatrics*. 2016;137(3):e20154079. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-4079>
3. Kessler RC, McLaughlin KA, Green JG, Gruber MJ, Sampson NA, Zaslavsky AM, et al. Childhood adversities and adult psychopathology in the WHO World Mental Health Surveys. *Br J Psychiatry*. 2010;197(5):378-85. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.110.080499>

## ENDS

### Notes for editors

Conference abstract O0049

#### Differential associations of childhood adversity subtypes and psychopathology in men and women

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**Introduction:** Prior evidence suggests that men and women might be differentially susceptible to distinct types of childhood adversity (CA), but research on gender-specific associations between CA subtypes and psychiatric symptoms is limited.

**Objectives:** To test the gender-specific associations of CA subtypes and psychiatric symptoms in the general population.

**Methods:** Data from 791 twins and siblings from the TwinssCan project were used. Psychopathology and CA exposure were assessed using the Symptom Checklist-90 Revised (SCL-90) and the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), respectively. The associations between the total CTQ scores and SCL-90 scores (i.e. total SCL-90, psychoticism, paranoid ideation, anxiety, depression, somatization, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, hostility, and phobic anxiety) were tested in men and women separately. The associations between the five CA subtypes (i.e. physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect) and total SCL-90 were tested in a mutually adjusted model. As exploratory analyses, the associations between all CA subtypes and the nine SCL-90 subdomain scores were similarly tested. The regression coefficients between men and women were compared using Chow’s test. All models were adjusted for age and family structure.

**Results:** Total CTQ was significantly associated with total SCL-90 in men ( $B = 0.013$ ,  $SE = 0.003$ ,  $P < .001$ ) and women ( $B = 0.011$ ,  $SE = 0.002$ ,  $P < .001$ ). The associations with the nine symptom domains were also significant in both genders ( $P < .001$ ). No



significant gender differences in the regression coefficients of total CTQ were detected. The analyses of CA subtypes showed a significant association between emotional abuse and total SCL-90 in women ( $B = 0.173$ ,  $SE = 0.030$ ,  $P < .001$ ) and men ( $B = 0.080$ ,  $SE = 0.035$ ,  $P = .023$ ), but the association was significantly stronger in women ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.10$ ,  $P = .043$ ). The association of sexual abuse and total SCL-90 was only significant in women ( $B = 0.217$ ,  $SE = 0.053$ ,  $P < .001$ ). The associations of emotional neglect ( $B = 0.061$ ,  $SE = 0.027$ ,  $P = .026$ ) and physical neglect ( $B = 0.167$ ,  $SE = 0.043$ ,  $P < .001$ ) with total SCL-90 were only significant in men. The explorative analyses of SCL-90 subdomains revealed significant associations of emotional abuse with all nine symptom domains and of sexual abuse with seven symptom domains in women. Significant associations of physical neglect with six symptom domains and of emotional neglect with depression were also detected in men. No other significant associations between CT subtypes and total SCL-90 or symptom domain scores were observed in men and women.

**Conclusions:** CA exposure was associated with diverse psychopathology similarly in both genders. However, women are more sensitive to abuse, but men are more sensitive to neglect. Gender-specific influences of CA subtypes on psychopathology should be considered in future studies.

**Disclosure of Interest:** None Declared