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Relationship between emotional numbing and arousal symptoms in American women of Japanese descent who experienced interpersonal victimization

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Abstract

In recent years, studies of veterans and others who experienced various types of trauma have found a strong relationship between emotional numbing and arousal symptoms, challenging the current DSM-IV diagnostic criteria, which combines emotional numbing and avoidance symptoms in a single criterion. In this paper, we investigate emotional numbing symptoms in a community-based random sample of women of Japanese descent who had experienced interpersonal victimization, such as childhood abuse, intimate partner violence, and violence perpetrated by non-intimates ($n = 202$). Controlling for age, place of birth, and timing and severity of victimization, emotional numbing symptom counts were associated more strongly with arousal than avoidance symptoms, consistent with previous studies of veterans and assaulted women. In addition, emotional numbing symptom counts were significantly associated with age and, to a lesser degree, country of birth. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, a number of studies have examined the relationship between emotional numbing (EN) and avoidance (AV) symptoms within the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Amdur & Liberzon, 2001; Feeny, Zoellner, Fitzgibbons, & Foa, 2000; Flack, Litz, Heich, Kaloupek, & Keane, 2000; Foa, Riggs, & Gershuny, 1995; King, Leskin, King, & Weathers, 1998; Litz et al., 1997; Taylor, Kuch, Koch, Crockett, & Passey, 1998; Tull & Roemer, 2003). Although the diagnostic criteria of the DSM-IV categorize emotional numbing and avoidance symptoms in a single criterion, there are growing empirical data that suggest that these two types of symptoms represent separate biological and/or emotional processes, and that emotional numbing is in fact more closely related to arousal than avoidance symptoms. In this paper, we investigated emotional numbing symptoms among American women of Japanese descent who had experienced interpersonal victimization.

Most previous studies of this issue examined post-traumatic symptoms in individuals exposed to war-related trauma, such as veterans. Using multiple regression analyses, Litz et al. (1997) found that emotional numbing symptoms were more strongly associated with hyperarousal symptoms than avoidance symptoms of PTSD among community-residing and help-seeking veterans. Similarly, Flack and colleagues' replication study (2000) of 1168 male service-seeking or service-using Vietnam veterans found a stronger association between hyperarousal and emotional numbing symptoms. King et al. (1998) used factor analysis to study PTSD symptoms among veterans and found that a model with four factors (reexperiencing, effortful avoidance, emotional numbing, and hyperarousal clusters) provided the best fit. The weakest relationship among the four factors was the association between effortful avoidance and emotional numbing symptoms (King et al., 1998). Another study of combat veterans using factor analysis also found that a two-factor model that combined avoidance and emotional numbing symptoms showed a poor fit; an alternative four-factor model consisting of intrusion, avoidance, numbing, and sleep-related symptoms showed a better fit (Amdur & Liberzon, 2001). Taylor et al. (1998) used principal axis factor analysis and found two correlated factors, namely intrusions/avoidance and hyperarousal/numbing among United Nations peacekeepers deployed in Bosnia as well as victims of motor vehicle accidents.

Compared to studies of war-related trauma, fewer studies of individuals who experienced other types of trauma have investigated emotional numbing symptoms. In a study of physically and sexually assaulted women, principal component factor analysis of respondents' symptoms yielded three factors: arousal/avoidance, numbing, and intrusion; effortful avoidance and numbing symptoms did not load on the same factor (Foa et al., 1995). This study also found that compared to other post-traumatic symptoms, emotional numbing symptoms had relatively higher positive ($M = 0.85$, range: 0.70–0.95) and negative predictive power ($M = 0.84$, range: 0.79–0.88) for PTSD, in that the

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