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Childhood emotional abuse and neglect as predictors of psychological and physical symptoms in women presenting to a primary care practice

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Abstract

Objective: There were two aims to this study: first to examine whether emotional abuse and neglect are significant predictors of psychological and somatic symptoms, and lifetime trauma exposure in women presenting to a primary care practice, and second to examine the strength of these relationships after controlling for the effects of other types of childhood abuse and trauma.

Method: Two-hundred and five women completed the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein et al., 1994), Trauma History Questionnaire (Green, 1996), the Symptom Checklist-revised (Derogatis, 1997), and the Revised Civilian Mississippi Scale for posttraumatic stress disorder (Norris & Perilla, 1996) when presenting to their primary care physician for a visit. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine unique contributions of emotional abuse and neglect variables on symptom measures while controlling for childhood sexual and physical abuse and lifetime trauma exposure.

Results: A history of emotional abuse and neglect was associated with increased anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress and physical symptoms, as well as lifetime trauma exposure. Physical and sexual abuse and lifetime trauma were also significant predictors of physical and psychological symptoms. Hierarchical multiple regressions demonstrated that emotional abuse and neglect predicted symptomatology in these women even when controlling for other types of abuse and lifetime trauma exposure.

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Conclusions: Long-standing behavioral consequences may arise as a result of childhood emotional abuse and neglect, specifically, poorer emotional and physical functioning, and vulnerability to further trauma exposure.

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Introduction

Studies have consistently demonstrated childhood sexual and physical abuse to be associated with a broad range of behavioral, psychological and physical problems that persist into adulthood including increased risk for depression, anxiety, substance abuse, personality disorders, revictimization (for review of the literature, see [Yehuda, Spertus, & Golier, 2001](#)), and increased physical complaints ([Moeller, Bachmann, & Moeller, 1993](#)), such as gastrointestinal distress and recurrent headaches ([Felitti, 1991](#)). More recently there have been a number of studies indicating that emotional abuse (i.e., psychological maltreatment and non-physical aggression) and emotional neglect (i.e., emotional deprivation or the absence of a nurturing emotional environment) may similarly be associated with adverse outcomes. Emotional abuse has been associated with increased levels of depression ([Briere & Runtz, 1988](#); [Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996](#); [Rich, Gingerich, & Rosen, 1997](#)), suicidality ([Briere & Runtz, 1988](#)), low self-esteem ([Sackett & Saunders, 1999](#)), and personality disorders ([Johnson et al., 2001](#)) in adulthood. In addition, several authors have shown that the combination of multiple types of abuse including emotional abuse and neglect can have devastating effects on the mental and physical health of such individuals as adults ([Briere & Runtz, 1988](#); [Moeller et al., 1993](#)). However, the effects of emotional abuse and neglect have generally been studied in individuals who have also experienced other types of abuse (i.e., physical and sexual abuse), and the unique effects of emotional abuse and neglect have not been examined. Thus, it has been difficult to ascertain whether emotional abuse and neglect might have significant long-term effects independent from other forms of abuse.

The use of statistical methods to examine the impact of emotional abuse as it occurs independently from other types of abuse is certainly one way to begin to examine unique contributions to psychological and physical health. [Meston, Heiman, and Trapnell \(1999\)](#) reported that emotional abuse is associated with poor body image and sexual dysfunction in male college students independent of other forms of abuse. In another study, [Briere and Runtz \(1988\)](#) reported the shared effects of multiple types of abuse in a sample of university women. However, they also showed that even when the shared effects of other forms of abuse were statistically accounted for, paternal psychological abuse remained a significant predictor of anxiety, depression, interpersonal sensitivity, and dissociation in these women. These results lend support to [Hart and Brassard's \(1987\)](#) proposition that psychological maltreatment may be at the “core of child maltreatment” and therefore a greater understanding of the consequences of such abuse is needed.

Addressing the relationship between emotional abuse and neglect, and subsequent psychopathology ultimately requires the evaluation of a wide range of samples. In the current

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