



# Life events as correlates of problem behavior and mental health in a residential population of adults with developmental disabilities

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## Abstract

Very few existing empirical studies have explored the putative association between exposure to negative life events and psychological well-being in adults with developmental disabilities. In the present study, data on exposure to life events in the previous 12 months, adaptive behavior, problem behavior, and psychiatric problems were provided by care staff for 93 adults with developmental disabilities living in a residential hospital setting. Residents had typically been exposed to between three and four negative life events mainly relating to staffing and residence changes, conflict, family bereavements and relationships, and illness or injury. Those exposed to more recent life events were also rated as displaying more frequent aggressive/destructive behavior, and were at increased risk for affective/neurotic disorder. The need for replication of these data, especially using designs allowing causality to be inferred, is emphasized.

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## 1. Introduction

Outside of the developmental disabilities field, empirical research over several decades has demonstrated that negative life events have an impact on psychological

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functioning (Paykel, 2001). For example, traumatic and other negative life events such as abuse, bereavement, relationship breakdown, and illness have been reliably associated with depression across the lifespan in children, adults, and older adults (Kraaij, Arensman, & Spinhoven, 2002; Sandberg, Rutter, Pickles, McGuinness, & Angold, 2001; Tennant, 2002). Negative life events have also been explored as correlates of psychological functioning in individuals with developmental disabilities. The majority of this research to date has focused on discrete categories of events including abuse, bereavement, and resettlement from institutional to community living environments.

The main question addressed in research on the physical and sexual abuse of people with developmental disabilities to date is that of prevalence. Thus, several studies show that people with developmental disabilities are the victims of abuse and that they may be at increased risk compared to members of the general population (Turk & Brown, 1993; Westcott & Jones, 1999). Some researchers have also explored the putative outcomes of abuse in individuals with developmental disabilities. In a recent review of sexual abuse and developmental disability, Sequeira and Hollins (2003) identified 25 studies published between 1974 and 2001. The majority of studies had concluded that behavior problems and psychiatric symptoms were elevated following abuse. However, there were no controlled studies and only a few that had adopted a systematic approach to collecting data on the impact of abuse on people with ID. Sequeira and Hollins highlighted a number of other methodological problems, including: the lack of disclosure, unstandardized measures, under-reporting, definitional difficulties, the victim's lack of understanding, and the victim's communication difficulties.

Research studies on the impact of bereavement have been largely anecdotal (Cathcart, 1995; Oswin, 1991). However, a number of empirical studies have also been published. Hollins and Esterhuyzen (1997) used a case control design to compare parentally bereaved adults with developmental disabilities to a matched non-bereaved group. The bereaved group attained higher scores on measures of psychopathology (Psychopathology Instrument for Mentally Retarded Adults, PIMRA, Matson, Kazdin, & Senatore, 1984) and behavior problems (Aberrant Behavior Checklist, ABC, Aman, Singh, Stewart, & Field, 1985). A 5-year follow-up of the bereaved sample suggested that psychiatric symptoms had typically reduced but behavior problems were still elevated (Bonell-Pascual et al., 1999). Similar results were obtained in MacHale and Carey's (2002) case control study of adults whose primary carer had died within 2 years of the research. Individuals in the bereaved group were rated as having more symptoms of affective disorder and more problems on the irritability, lethargy and hyperactivity scales of the ABC.

Research on the outcomes of deinstitutionalization is also relevant to the current discussion. Resettlement from institutional settings is a major event that has affected a large number of individuals in Western countries such as the US, the UK, and Australia (Braddock, Emerson, Felce, & Stancliffe, 2001), and might be considered a life event of particular significance for people with developmental disabilities. Reviews of research studies carried out both in the US (e.g., Kim,

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