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Developmental timing of trauma exposure and emotion dysregulation in adulthood: Are there sensitive periods when trauma is most harmful?

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Abstract

Background:

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This study aimed to determine whether there were sensitive periods when a first exposure to trauma was most associated with emotion dysregulation in adulthood.

Methods:

Adult participants came from a public urban hospital in Atlanta, GA (n=1,944). Lifetime trauma exposure was assessed using the Traumatic Events Inventory (TEI). Multiple linear regression models were used to assess the association between the developmental timing of first trauma exposure, classified as early childhood (ages 0-5), middle childhood (ages 6-10), adolescence (ages 11-18), and adulthood (ages 19+), on adult emotion dysregulation symptoms, measured using the abbreviated Emotion Dysregulation Scale.

Results:

Participants exposed to trauma at any age had higher emotion dysregulation scores than their unexposed peers. However, participants first exposed to child maltreatment or interpersonal violence during middle childhood had higher emotion dysregulation scores relative to those first exposed during other developmental stages; these developmental timing differences were detected even after controlling for sociodemographic factors, exposure to other trauma, and frequency of exposure to trauma. Further, after controlling for current psychiatric symptoms, the effect of other interpersonal trauma exposure in middle childhood was diminished and first exposure to other interpersonal violence in early childhood was associated with significantly lower emotion dysregulation symptoms.

Limitations:

Limitations of this study include the use of retrospective reports and absence of complete information about trauma severity or duration.

Conclusion:

These findings should be replicated in other population-based samples with prospective designs to confirm the importance of developmental timing of trauma on later emotion dysregulation.

Keywords: sensitive periods; emotion regulation, emotion dysregulation, child maltreatment; trauma

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