

## How Does Childhood Trauma Affect Later Life?

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A popular quote by John Milton (1608 – 1674), an English poet, is that “The childhood shows the man, as morning shows the day” (Milton, 1671, line 220). Can we predict adult behaviour based on his/her childhood? The answer can help us to take a proactive approach to address behavioural problems in adulthood, therefore, this paper focuses on the question, “How does childhood trauma affect psychological problems later in life?” In order to answer the question, I have reviewed four article journals. To begin, I will present a brief introduction of types and sources of childhood trauma, followed by related topics such as; types of trauma, potential long-term effects, gender and cultural vulnerability and a conclusion to explore the answer.

### **Types of Childhood Trauma and its Effects**

An adult may have seen various kinds of traumatic experiences in his

childhood. These traumatic experiences could be “parents fighting [and divorce], physical abuse and other childhood traumas” (Roesler & McKenzie, 1994, p. 145), and “history of sexual abuse [e.g., rape], physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect” (Chu & Dill, 1990; Coons, et al., 1989; Putman, et al., 1986; Ross, et al., 1991) (as cited in Irwin, 1999, p. 158). All or some of these trauma may lead to the depression (Briere and Runtz, 1988; Browne and Finkelhor, 1986; Stein, et al., 1988) (as cited in Roesler & McKenzie, 1994, p. 145), “lowered self-esteem” (Browne and Finkelhor, 1986) (as cited in Roesler & McKenzie, 1994), “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD; Coons, et al., 1990) (as cited in Roesler & McKenzie, 1994), dissociation (Beiere and Tuntz, 1988; Coons, et al., 1990) (as cited in Roesler & McKenzie, 1994), and psychological dysfunctions also known as the dissociative disorders (Spiegel, 1993) (as cited in Irwin, 1999, p. 157). Next

section will discuss various kinds of traumatic experiences related to sex and emotion and its effects in adulthood.

### **Effects from Childhood Trauma Such as Sexual, Physical and Emotional Abuse**

According to the report presented by Finkelhor, et al. (1990) (as cited in Roesler & McKenzie, 1994, p. 145) childhood sexual abuse is relatively common. According to his study, 16% men and 27% of women had experienced sexual abuse in their childhood. In comparison with other childhood traumatic experience, various studies have found that rape is one of the major childhood event to cause posttraumatic stress disorders (Bolton, O’Ryan, Udwin, Boyle & Yule, 2000, p. 521). The effects of trauma such as rape can be very severe.

Based on the study of 100 Australian men and women, conducted by Irwin (1999, p. 157), childhood trauma, such as physical and emotional abuse and neglect can also lead to the “pathological dissociative experiences such as depersonalization and dissociative

amnesia” (Irwin 1999, 158). One of the study, conducted by Roesler & McKenzie, 1994, p. 149), shows that such trauma is often multifactorial as they found that 25% of respondents had more than one abuse in their childhood. Similarly, Angeles Epidemiologic Catchment Area Study shows that such trauma can lead single or multiple types of psychological and behavioural problems (as cited in Roesler & McKenzie, 1994). Based on this study, people sexually molested as children had 2 to 4 times the risk of depression, alcohol or drug abuse, and anxiety disorders (Burnman, et al., 1988) (as cited in Roesler & McKenzie, 1994, p. 145). Beside sexual, physical and emotional abuse, a person can acquire various traumatic experiences from political, social and geological sources such as war, conflict and natural disaster.

### **Effects from Childhood Trauma Such as War, Conflict and Disaster**

A study of 59 Cambodian young adult, conducted by Hubbard, Realmuto, Northwood and Masten (1995, p. 1167),

showed that their sample population were facing various kinds of psychological problems, such as “depression and generalized anxiety disorder” (Hubbard, et al., 1995, p. 1167).

In another disaster related study on 216 young survivor of a shipping disaster, conducted by Bolton, et al. (2000, p. 519), have also shown that childhood trauma can suffer unwanted psychological problem in later life. Their study mentioned that huge number of survivors were also developed other kinds of disorders followed by post-traumatic stress disorder (Bolton, et al.). Results of such disaster related study also suggests that prolonged childhood trauma experience may have long-term psychological problems on survivors (Hubbard, et al., 1995, p. 1170).

### **Effects on Gender, Culture and Vulnerability**

Are females more vulnerable for psychological problems later in life than male or do they perceive traumatic experience differently? According to

Bolton, et al. (2000, p. 513), Females are more vulnerable to the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other psychopathology than male. Similarly, the study of 59 Cambodian young adult, conducted by Hubbard, et al. (1995, p. 1167), found that Somatoform pain disorder was found only among women.

### **Long-Term Effects**

According to Bolton, et al. (2000, p. 512), in comparison with short-term psychological effect, the number of study on long-term psychological effects are relatively low. Their study in 216 shipping disaster, survival has indicated that childhood trauma can lead to the long-term psychological problems lasting for years (Bolton, et al., 2000, p. 522). Similarly, the study of 59 Cambodian young adult showed a positive correlation between the level of trauma exposure in their childhood and the duration of its adverse effects (Hubbard, Realmuto, Northwood & Masten, 1995, p. 1172).

### **Conclusion**

An adult may have several interconnected reasons for his psychological disorders, however, based on various studies, presented in this paper, I can conclude that childhood trauma may affect a person in his later life in various ways, mainly psychological and mental health problems. Studies have shown that one traumatic event may cause one or more mental health problems in adulthood, as well as, one mental health problem can also introduce another new mental health problem. One of the major issues with the study like this, which is based on past memories, there could be enormous environmental factors

that could positively or negatively influence the research result (Roesler, McKenzie, p. 150). However, as I have studied four different papers to prepare this paper, and all of these previous research consistently shows the positive correlation between various kinds of childhood trauma and various kinds of adverse psychological problems and dysfunctions in later life. Now, I can conclude that poet John Milton is right. The childhood shows the adulthood. Traumatic events that occurred in childhood can severely disrupt later in life.

### **References**

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