



Childhood abuse, PTSD, and Physical Health

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Introduction

Exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have long term effects on mental health. Less extensively researched is the relationship between ACEs and negative physical health conditions; comparable to that observed for poor mental health.

Based on a large community sample of Danish participants born in 1984 we have investigated the relationships between ACEs, PTSD, and physical health. More specifically we tested:

1. The relationship between PTSD symptoms, ACE, and body weight (BMI)
2. The influence of different types of ACEs (Armour et al.; in press) on physical health, and psychological distress and health risk behaviours as potential mediators



Table 2. Indirect (Mediated) Effects of the Childhood Abuse Types on Physical Health

	Physical health				
	Product of coefficients			BC 95% CI	
	Point estimate	SE	Z	Lower	Upper
Emotional abuse					
BMI	0.10*	0.03	3.78	0.04	0.20
Alcohol	0.04*	0.01	3.14	0.01	0.08
Drugs	0.04*	0.02	2.46	0.01	0.08
Psychological distress	0.46*	0.05	10.11	0.37	0.57
Sexual abuse					
BMI	0.04	0.05	0.92	-0.03	0.18
Alcohol	0.05*	0.02	2.91	0.01	0.12
Drugs	0.03*	0.01	2.03	0.01	0.07
Psychological distress	0.62*	0.08	8.23	0.47	0.83
Poly-victimization					
BMI	0.08*	0.04	2.05	0.02	0.18
Alcohol	0.06*	0.02	2.96	0.02	0.14
Drugs	0.04	0.02	1.91	-0.01	0.08
Psychological distress	0.52*	0.06	8.54	0.36	0.69

Method

A stratified random probability survey was conducted in Denmark by the Danish National Centre for Social Research between 2008 and 2009 with 2981 participants born in 1984 achieving a response rate of 67%.

The participants were interviewed with a structured interview with questions pertaining psychological symptoms (PTSD, depression), exposure to childhood abuse, self-perceived general physical health, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, height, and body weight.

Table 1. BMI and Childhood Abuse Types

		Childhood abuse categories			
		emotionally abused	sexually abused	Poly-victimization	non-abused
Underweight	n	13	0	2	68
	% within abuse Class	5.0%	.0%	3.2%	2.6%
Normal weight	n	166	44	35	1773
	% within abuse class	64.3%	74.6%	55.6%	69.0%
Overweight	n	62	8	17	563
	% within abuse Class	24.0%	13.6%	27.0%	21.9%
Obese	n	17	7	9	164
	% within abuse Class	6.6%	11.9%	14.3%	6.4%

Results

Results showed that PTSD symptomatology and ACE were significantly associated with both underweight and overweight/obesity. Different childhood abuse types were related to underweight and overweight/obesity respectively. Childhood emotional abuse was especially associated with underweight, whereas sexual abuse and poly-victimization were particularly associated with overweight/obesity.

All three types of ACEs were significantly associated with poorer self-reported physical health. Psychological distress and health risk behaviours partially mediated the relationship between non-abuse, sexual abuse, poly-victimization, and physical health, and fully mediated the relationship between emotional abuse and physical health.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that health care professionals may benefit from assessing PTSD and childhood abuse in the treatment of both overweight and underweight individuals.

Health risk behaviors and symptoms of psychological distress may contribute to some of the long-lasting consequences of childhood abuse on adult physical health.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

1. Armour, C., Elklit, A. & Christoffersen, N. M. (in press). A Latent Class Analysis of Childhood Maltreatment: Identifying Abuse Typologies. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*.
2. Roenholt, S., Beck, N. N., Karsberg, S. H., & Elklit, A. (2012). Post-traumatic stress symptoms and childhood abuse categories in a national representative sample for a specific age group: associations to body mass index. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 3, 17888, doi: 10.3402/ejpt.v3i0.17188
3. Hansen, B. N.; Palic, S., Andersen, E. T. & Roenholt, S. (accepted). Childhood Abuse Types and Physical Health at the Age of 24: Testing Health Risk Behaviors and Psychological Distress as Mediators. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*.
4. www.psykotraume.dk

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