

Childhood abuse associated with onset of psychosis in women

1 April 2009

Researchers at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London have published new research which indicates that women with severe mental illness are more likely to have been abused in childhood than the general population. But the same association has not been found in men.

The researchers believe their findings point to differences in the way boys and girls respond to traumatic and upsetting experiences. The paper which is published in the April issue of the *British Journal of Psychiatry* compared two groups of adults with all the participants were aged between 16 and 64, and lived in either south-east London or Nottingham.

Those in the first group had experienced psychotic symptoms, such as [hallucinations](#) or delusions and received treatment for [depression](#), mania or [schizophrenia](#). Those in the second group had no mental health problems, and acted as a control sample. Both groups were asked whether they experienced physical or sexual abuse during their childhood.

Women with psychosis were twice as likely to report either physical or sexual abuse compared to healthy women. But no such association was found in men.

The researchers suggest that one explanation for this is that girls are more likely to 'internalise' difficulties than boys. In other words, girls who are abused may distance themselves from other people, and become overly suspicious of other people's behaviour. This may put them at greater risk of psychotic symptoms in the future, such as paranoid delusions.

In contrast, boys may be more likely to 'act out' following physical abuse and potentially be at greater risk for antisocial behaviour.

The lead author on this paper, Helen Fisher,

Researcher in Psychosis at the Institute of Psychiatry at King's said: "These findings do not mean that if a child is abused they will develop psychosis; but women with such disorders are more likely to reveal a background which included childhood abuse.

"These findings point to the need for gender-specific interventions for abused children to prevent later mental health and behavioural problems."

"We also know that there are psychological, biological and genetic factors that may contribute to this condition in women and more attention needs to be given to understanding how adult psychosis develops. Excitingly we have just been awarded a Wellcome Trust grant to repeat this original study on a larger scale to enable us to investigate the factors involved in this link between childhood abuse and psychotic disorders."

More information: "Gender differences in the association between childhood abuse and psychosis" is published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 194: 319-325.

Source: King's College London

APA citation: Childhood abuse associated with onset of psychosis in women (2009, April 1) retrieved 14 September 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-04-childhood-abuse-onset-psychosis-women.html>

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