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Child Abuse Victims and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

ScienceDaily (Oct. 27, 2010) — Victims of child abuse who blame themselves and their families for their situation present higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder. This is one of the conclusions drawn from a study conducted by the University of Granada, where 1,500 university students participated. The study showed that long-term psychological adjustment of victims of sexual abuse in childhood significantly depends on some cognitive factors and on their interaction.

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In cases of child sexual abuse, there are children and teenagers that blame themselves (for example, after the thought that the abuse was led by them) or their family (thinking that their family should have protected them) for the abuse suffered in their childhood. This type of victims resort more frequently to avoidance coping. Thus, they try to sleep more than usual, avoid thinking on the problem, or resort to alcohol and drug abuse - in the case of teenagers. This behaviour leaves important psychological after-effects on victims: concretely, they present more symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

These are some of the conclusions drawn from a research conducted by David Cantón Cortés, at the Department of Evolutionary and Educational Psychology of the University of Granada, and led by professors Fernando Justicia Justicia and José Cantón Duarte. In their study -developed in collaboration with the University of Cambridge (United Kingdom)-, they analyzed how different cognitive variables affect the development of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. To such purpose, a sample of victims of child sexual abuse was used.

Concretely, the researchers analyzed the moderating role of coping strategies, the impact of the sense of guilt and of blaming others, and the feelings triggered by sexual abuse. This research proved that long-term psychological adjustment of victims of child sexual abuse greatly depends on some cognitive factors, and on their interaction. Further, this study helped to determine under what circumstances (associated to situations of sexual abuse) these cognitive factors have higher impact.

To carry out this study, 1,500 female university students were asked to answer an anonymous test developed by University of Granada researchers. Thus, information from 160 women that had been victims of child abuse was obtained. These cases constituted the convenience sample of the study.

The study conducted by Cantón Cortés is innovative, since it not only analyzes the role of cognitive variables in the psychological adjustment of victims of child abuse, but it also analyzes the role of such variables, according to the circumstances of the abuse. That is, the study describes the conditions that make such cognitive variables have higher impact on psychological adjustment.

The researcher states that the results "may be useful for the clinical treatment of victims of child abuse, since it allows the identification of three intervention areas extremely valuable, both for their impact on adjustment, and because they can be modified (coping strategies, sense of guilt, feelings caused by sexual abuse)."

Part of the results of this research will be published soon in the journal *Child Abuse & Neglect*, one of the most relevant and influential journals specialized on child sexual abuse.

Editor's Note: This article is not intended to provide medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.

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