

CHILD ABUSE LEADS TO DEPRESSION IN ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS

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Abuse or neglect during childhood has lasting, harmful effects. Sexual abuse is even more harmful than physical abuse. Adolescents and young adults who were abused or neglected during childhood are more than three times as likely to become depressed or suicidal, according to a new study in the *Journal of Child Psychiatry* (1999).

This research study also found that children who are sexually abused are more likely to become depressed or suicidal. Victims of sexual abuse were about six times more likely to attempt suicide; additionally, the risk of repeated suicide attempts was eight times higher than in children who were not sexually abused. Further, 36 percent of those subjected to sexual abuse were diagnosed with a depressive disorder, compared to a 25 percent rate in victims of all types of child abuse or neglect.

Sexual abuse carries the greatest risk of depression and suicide and this has always been noted in the research. More than a third, 36 percent of sexually abused youths attempted suicide, compared to 16 percent of physically abused youths. Six percent of children without a history of abuse reported attempting suicide.

Past studies have demonstrated a connection between childhood abuse and an increased risk for mental disorders. Several other studies have also shown an association between physical childhood abuse and depression.

Researchers from this recent study also found that the incidence of suicide attempts was higher during adolescence. "Adolescence is the most vulnerable time for sexually abused youths, who are more prone to make repeated suicide attempts," the researchers said.

Contextual factors such as family conflict, parental substance abuse and illegal activities should be addressed and dealt with in the treatment of depressed and suicidal adolescents who have been neglected in childhood. Familial, parental and environmental factors are often possible contributors to depression. Familial factors include a poor marriage; parental factors include a low parental involvement; and environmental factors include welfare dependence and other socioeconomic issues.

These researchers suggest that future studies should address specific characteristics of the abuse, including the relationship of the abuser and the duration, frequency and severity of the abuse. Clinicians evaluating depressed and suicidal youths should screen specifically for the presence of different types of abuse.