Predictors of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in an
Australian Community Sample of Young People

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Predictors of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Abstract

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is one of the most common disorders following exposure to trauma. It is a serious, often chronic, and debilitating disorder affecting children, young people, and adults. However, relatively little is known about the prevalence, risk factors, and maintenance of this disorder in Australian young people. This study describes the lifetime prevalence, chronicity, and psychological comorbidity of PTSD in an Australian birth cohort of 706 young people oversampled for maternal history of depression. Risk factors for the development of PTSD in young people were explored. Using a prospective, longitudinal design, data was collected on children from birth to age 20 years. Parent- and/or self-report data were available with diagnostic interviews conducted at 15 and 20 years. Logistic regression analyses were used to examine within-individual and environmental risk factors for PTSD and depression. A total of 6.4% of young people received a diagnosis of clinical PTSD with an additional 4.2% who had subclinical PTSD. PTSD was more common amongst females than males. The mean age of onset was 15 years and 4 months, and the mean duration of symptoms was 1 year and 11 months at the 20-year follow-up. The most common triggering event was a reported sexual assault and the second most reported triggering event was the witnessing of a severe injury or death of another person. PTSD was highly comorbid with lifetime diagnoses of major depression, other anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, behavioural disorders, and suicide attempts. A total of 19% of young people with clinical PTSD reported at least one lifetime suicide attempt. When compared to young people with no PTSD symptoms, female gender,
premorbid anxiety, stressful life events and maternal abuse history significantly predicted PTSD symptoms. When compared to young people with depression, female gender, premorbid depression and substance use, mothers’ anxiety, and stressful life events predicted PTSD symptoms in young people. Results help to identify young people most at risk of PTSD and are discussed in relation to prevention and treatment efforts.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed: .................................................................

Date: ...............................................................  

Naomi Michelle Beutel
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Unfortunately, research papers do little to capture the pain, loss, confusion, and gut wrenching tragedy behind PTSD. I urge the reader to please remember that behind every PTSD ‘number’ in this thesis, there is a real life story of hurt and pain in the life of an Australian young person. Some of these stories will be forever etched into my
memory and although throughout interviewing we, as psychologists, remain professional and composed, even today these stories can still stir some strong emotions for me. For instance, I will never forget hearing the devastating emotional agony experienced by a young person who lost family members in a gruesome and brutal homicide; or the young man who felt that his world was turned upside down by a terrifying home invasion; the young people who have testified against their own parents; the girls who told of their rape experiences; the young person who has never been the same since witnessing and trying to save their partner who was accidentally strangulated in a freak accident; the young man so paralysed by terror that not only did he smoke at least a packet of cigarettes between panic attacks during his interview (spread across two days), but who begs his parents to take him to hospital each night because he is certain that the symptoms he feels are signalling his imminent death; the ones who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and witnessed a suicide; the girl who lives in a world of fantasy and still talks to her dolls as if they are real people; and, the young person who cannot forgive himself for the death of his friend who was killed in a vehicle accident, the same accident that he survived. These are only some of the many stories of young people affected in a severe way by the trauma they have experienced. Have they not been through enough without suffering for months or even years after the event? We owe it to them to understand their troubles and find a way to prevent the ongoing, often devastating, sequelae of posttraumatic stress disorder.

In addition to the participants, I have two supervisors to thank, and will do so in order of involvement. I will always be grateful to Dr Michael Free who saw
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Wallpaper of photos of MUSP babies on display at the new Museum of Brisbane (MoB) at its Opening Exhibition from October 2003 to April 2004 (Photograph courtesy of MoB).