

The impact of childhood abuse on adult self-esteem and emotional regulation

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Introduction

- The occurrence of traumatic experiences in childhood can lead to a disruption in the development of secure internal representations, with a negative impact on self-esteem [1]. In addition, child victimization may compromise their emotional regulation skills [2] and it has been shown that individuals with lower self-esteem have less emotional regulation skills [3].
- Children who have been victims of maltreatment tend to show affective lability, negativity, and expression of inappropriate affection in specific situations [4]. They tend to show less adaptive emotional regulation strategies, and higher levels of negative affection and impulsivity, which are associated with behavior problems [5]. Furthermore, studies with adults showed that those who suffered several types of abuse during childhood tend to have worse interpersonal relationships [6].
- The main objective of the current study was to analyze the relationship between childhood abuse, adult self-esteem, and emotion regulation.

Method

Participants

- The sample was composed of 96 Portuguese adults:
 - 53% are female and 47% are male,
 - Ages between 18 and 61 years old ($M = 27.95$, $SD = 11.60$).

Procedure

- The participants answered online to:
 - Sociodemographic questionnaire.
 - Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – CTQ [7]
 - Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale – DERS [8]
 - Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale – RSES [9]

Results

Table 1

Correlations between childhood trauma, self-esteem and emotional regulation ($n=96$)

	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
1. RSES Total	-.319**	-.330**	-.275**	-.294**	-.192	-.169	-.561**	-.413**	-.336**	-.373**	-.200	-.508**	-.542**
2. CTQ Total	—	.877**	.503**	.749**	.857**	.814**	.422**	.311**	.243*	.431**	-.022	.465**	.209*
3. Emotional Abuse		—	.520**	.591**	.668**	.644**	.449**	.289**	.294**	.472**	-.043	.502**	.229*
4. Emotional Neglect			—	0.038	.214*	.443**	.288**	.067	.211*	.293**	.233*	.283**	.147
5. Sexual Abuse				—	.694**	.485**	.335**	.321**	.179	.313**	-.147	.381**	.207*
6. Physical Abuse					—	.659**	.308**	.252*	.133	.336**	-.032	.335**	.163
7. Physical Neglect						—	.214*	.166	.100	.238*	-.003	.238*	.084
8. DERS Total							—	.775**	.747**	.861**	.096	.914**	.664**
9. Nonacceptance								—	.428**	.596**	-.128	.683**	.415**
10. Goals									—	.684**	-.095	.618**	.399**
11. Impulses										—	-.074	.806**	.375**
12. Awareness											—	-.073	.188
13. Strategies												—	.542**
14. Clarity													—

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

- There are significant statistical positive correlations between the total score of the CTQ and :
 - the total score of the DERS ($r = .422$, $p < .001$),
 - not acceptance of emotional responses ($r = .311$, $p = .002$),
 - difficulties engaging in goal-directed behavior ($r = .243$, $p = .017$),
 - impulse control difficulties ($r = .431$, $p < .001$),
 - limited access to emotion regulation strategies ($r = .465$, $p < .001$),
 - and lack of emotional clarity ($r = .209$, $p = .041$),
 - emotional abuse ($r = .877$, $p < .001$),
 - emotional neglect ($r = .503$, $p < .001$),
 - sexual abuse ($r = .749$, $p < .001$),
 - physical abuse ($r = .857$, $p < .001$),
 - physical neglect ($r = .814$, $p < .001$).

- There are significant statistical negative correlations between the self-esteem and:
 - the total score of the CTQ ($r = -.319$, $p = .002$),
 - the total score of the DERS ($r = -.561$, $p < .001$),
 - not acceptance of emotional responses ($r = -.413$, $p < .001$),
 - difficulties engaging in goal-directed behavior ($r = -.336$, $p = .001$),
 - impulse control difficulties ($r = -.373$, $p < .001$),
 - limited access to emotion regulation strategies ($r = -.508$, $p < .001$),
 - and lack of emotional clarity ($r = -.542$, $p < .001$),
 - emotional abuse ($r = -.330$, $p = .001$),
 - emotional neglect ($r = -.257$, $p = .007$),
 - sexual abuse ($r = -.294$, $p = .004$).

Discussion

Traumatic experiences in childhood are associated with emotional regulation difficulties in adults, which is corroborated by other studies [10]. The experience of victimization in childhood can lead to a perception of lower self-esteem in adult life.

In our research, the participants with difficulties in emotion regulation, tend to show difficulties engaging in goal-directed behavior and this result is corroborated with the literature [4]. Furthermore, those who have been victims during childhood are more likely to be victimized more often and in different ways during their lifetime [11], which is corroborated by our results.

The relationship between child abuse and self-esteem and also between child abuse and the emotional regulation difficulties highlights the need to develop psychological intervention aiming to enhance the positive self-esteem and the adaptive emotional skills in adulthood.

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