

Understanding the Complexities of Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) for Children and Young People

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Dr Richard Meiser-Stedman and Jessica Memarzi

Singularly Complex - The ASPECTS study of child and adolescent Emergency Department attendees

In this talk we will present data from a study of youth exposed to single event trauma and attending at an Emergency Department. This study examined the power of different models to predict the development of PTSD, Complex PTSD (CPTSD), depression and anxiety in this age group. Children and young people (n=260, aged 8 – 17 years) recruited from local Emergency Departments were assessed at two and nine weeks post-trauma. Data obtained from self-report questionnaires completed by the child, telephone interviews with parents and hospital data was used to develop four predictive models of risk factors for PTSD, CPTSD, depression and Generalised Anxiety Disorder. ICD-11 proposed diagnostic criteria were used to generate measures for CPTSD and PTSD, to assess for risk factors and identify the sample prevalence of these disorders.

At nine weeks post-trauma, 64% did not meet criteria for any disorder, 24% met criteria for PTSD, 5% met criteria for CPTSD, 24% and 11% had developed clinically significant symptoms of depression and GAD, respectively. A cognitive model was found to be the most powerful predictive model; a psychosocial model was weak, and subjective markers of event severity were more powerful than objective measures. The development of symptoms of CPTSD may occur in children and adolescents who have experienced a single-event trauma, validating this new ICD-11 diagnostic category and encouraging the conceptualisation of its development after single trauma. The cognitive model of PTSD shows utility in identifying predictors of PTSD, CPTSD, depression and GAD, particularly the role of trauma-related negative appraisals. This supports the application of cognitive interventions which focus upon re-appraising trauma-related beliefs in children and adolescents, but raises some questions around the strength of these models and the overlap between different forms of post-traumatic psychopathology.

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