



Original Article

# The relationship between childhood abuse experience and primary stress confronting methods and maladaptive schemas

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Child abuse can lead to destructive long term consequences, in addition to the short term ones. The present study aims to examine the relationship between childhood abuse experience and primary stress confronting methods and maladaptive schemas.

**Materials and Methods:** This is a cross-sectional analytic study. The study subjects were randomly selected using multiple sampling method. First, 6 counseling centers were selected from counseling centers in western Tehran using cluster sampling; then a sample of 318 persons (192 women and 126 men) were identified and studied from these centers. The data collecting instruments were Child Abuse Self Report Scales (CASRS) and Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ) and the methods of Billings and Moos's Coping Styles Questionnaire (CSQ). Data analysis was performed through T tests and correlative coefficient and multiple regressions by SPSS software version 19.

**Results:** Findings showed a negative relationship between problem solving methods and acquiring social support with each of the four subscale of abuse ( $p=0.01$ ) and a positive relationship between cognitive evaluation and emotional control ( $p=0.01$ ). Also, the total score of the primary maladaptive schemas has a significant positive relationship with each of the four abuse subscales ( $p=0.01$ ). There is a significant difference between men and women in physical and emotional abuse subscales and problem solving, emotional control and maladaptive schemas methods subscales. Emotional abuse and negligence subscales could predict the primary maladaptive schemas and stress confronting methods.

**Conclusion:** Experiencing childhood abuse has a basic role in forming the primary maladaptive schemas and thrill-oriented responses.

**Keywords:** Abuse, Childhood, Schema

## Please cite this paper as:

Rostami M, Saadati N, Ghezelsefloo M. The relationship between childhood abuse experience and primary stress confronting methods and maladaptive schemas. *Journal of Fundamentals of Mental Health* 2015 Nov-Dec; 17(6): 269-77.

## Introduction

In danger of various forms of abuse in family of society, children are among the most vulnerable groups of any civilization (1). Child abuse has taken various forms, and unfortunately, family itself has been a cradle of violence and pain for children (2). Child abuse is defined as a behavior in which children are subject to different forms of physical, sexual, indifference and emotional abuses (3). Any sort of activity or negligent action that endangers physical and mental health is considered as child abuse (4). Nowadays child abuse is one of the

priority abuse types in regards with society and healthcare throughout the world. Sexual, physical, emotional and indifference abuses are detestable and unaccepted, considered a crime and proceeds with legal prosecution (1).

Many psychological studies indicate that child abuse has negative emotional, behavioral and cognitive influences on children. Long-term influences of physical abuse are the emergence of behavioral and psychological disorders during adolescence and youth (5). Studies suggest a direct correlation between abuse experiences and risk-taking ability, as well as child abuse and personality traits, hazardous behavior and its subsidiaries (Ghazalsafloo and Rostami). Results from analysis of multiple linear regression in their study shows that abuse experience can predict 14% of general risk-

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Received: Nov. 12, 2014  
Accepted: May. 12, 2015

taking ability, 25% of neurosis, 14% extroversion, 10% openness, 10% flexibility and %13 sense of duty (6).

Physical misbehavior or abuse is defined as inflicting physical injuries to children below 18 years old by their benefactors or guardians to the extent, which endanger their health (7). Emotional abuse occurs when parents intentionally and knowingly as opposition to small mistakes tend to punish, isolate, discourage and force children out of the place of living or prevent them from communication with people their age (8). Behaviors that carry messages of loathing, blame or threat, such as shouting at children or mocking them fall into the category of emotional abuse. In other words, any behavior of this sort questions child's integrity. Sexual abuse is any defined as establishing any sort of sexual contact with children by adults. Behaviors such as sensational touching, indecent exposure and ultimately rape fall into this category (7). Emotional and sexual abuses are common issues threatening children and teenagers while having numerous negative consequences (9). In fact, childhood abuses unavoidably affect adulthood that is harmful to most people; creating maladaptive schemas that adults try to cope with constantly. Even though not all schemas are based on harmful or misbehavior activities, all tend to intrude a healthy life. Since people see their schemas unquestionable and not needing to be verified, they form the succeeding experiences and play effective roles in their way of thinking, emotions, behavior and way of making communication with others. Schemas reveal specific details about childhood and adolescence environments. They usually illustrate one's emotional feeling rooted in their childhood and adolescence correctly, even if the cause is not clear (10).

Preliminary maladaptive schemas in most cases are foundations of behavioral disorders such as anxiety, depression, substance use disorder, physical/mental disorders etc. Schemas have different intensity and range (11). The more intense a schema gets, the more potential a person has to trigger them. For example, if a person has been subject to frequent punishment or criticism by both of the parents during childhood, the schema is triggered by anyone, whereas if only one parent has been responsible, only people of the same gender as the parent could stimulate the schema. In overall, the more severe the schema is, the more negative emotions emerge and the more duration it takes to fade (10). Margaret et.al in their study titled "relationship between child abuse and teenagers'

preliminary maladaptive schemas" conducted semi-structured interviews on 76 depression-diagnosed teenagers and published a report in regards with physical, sexual and emotional abuse from their parents that suggested a positive correlation between childhood abuse experience and preliminary maladaptive schemas (12). One's behavior is not a part of his schema, maladaptive behaviors are rather responses given to preliminary maladaptive schemas. The maladaptive behaviors that are stimulated by schemas but are not parts of them are called "coping strategies". Even though most of coping strategies emerge as behaviors, patients use cognitive and emotional approaches to cope with the schemas. Three coping strategies to schemas are: 1. Schema excessive compensation (overcompensation), 2. Schema avoidance, 3. Schema submission. Coping responses are those that are available in people's behavior inventory to counter threats. In other words, all case-specific response people present to reveal excessive compensation, avoidance and submission (13). Coping strategies are initiated in situations, which there is a wide gap between life's demands and available resources to provide for the demands.

Cognitive-evaluation researchers claim that cognitive-evaluative schemas of individuals when facing self-related stressful situations emerge as emotional responses such as anger, guilt, pride and plotting to relieve the dissatisfaction (14). Rostami et al. in their study revealed negative correlations between the four factors of sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse and indifference with gaining social attention and positive correlations with emotional restraint. They also claim to have found a negative correlation between emotional abuse and problem-solving negligence and a positive correlation between physical and sexual abuses and cognitive evaluation and physical restraint (15). Donovan suggested individuals with child sexual abuse experiences are more likely to avoid responding to obstacles while emotionally respond when facing daily-life crises. He found a correlation between sexual-abuse experience and the way people evaluate themselves or others (16). Rostami et al. in another study claims the most reported abuse to be emotional and the least to be sexual. They also claim that there is a positive correlation between misbehavior and mental health (4). Walsha et al. in their study revealed a positive correlation between childhood abuse experience and using emotional coping strategies (17). Based on the aforementioned issues, this study aims to evaluate the correlations between childhood abuse experience

and stress-coping strategies and preliminary adverse schemas in residents of Tehran.

### Materials and Methods

Current research is a descriptive cross-sectional study. 318 cases were calculated using Cochran formula. The individuals were chosen using multi-stage sampling. First, using cluster sampling, 6 centers were chosen among west-Tehran counseling centers, then 318 individuals (192 male and 126 female) were chosen randomly with equal chance. Due to the delicacy of the subject matter, heads of the counseling centers were first introduced the research, and then with their permission, the information was given. Chosen samples were first explained the details of the study, then handed consent forms to fill. Next, they were given information on how to proceed with the questionnaires and finally obtained the questionnaires. No time limit was applied in filling the questionnaires.

#### Research instruments

- *Child Abuse Self-Report Scale (CASRS)*: This questionnaire was designed by Mohammadkhani et al. and evaluates 38 items, ranging from child abuse behavior, sexual harassment, emotional harassment, to household incongruity, physical abuse and inattention to children. 8 questions cover the subject of child physical abuse, 5 questions of sexual abuse, 14 questions of emotional abuse and 11 questions of inattention and negligence. All questions were designed based on Likert scale, four options were presented, "never", "sometimes", "often" and "usually" scales present complete absence of abuse to complete presence. Mohammadkhani calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient of child abuse to be 0.92 (18). This coefficient indicates high internal consistency of scale. The coefficient is calculated to be between 0.79 and 0.89 in regards with emotional, inattention, physical and sexual abuses. Moreover, all calculated coefficients were meaningful when 0.001. Also respectively Questions from number 15 to 25 which are in regards with inattention subscales are scored conversely [19]. Rostami et al. in their study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total score 0.80 and subscales sexual abuse, physical, emotional and neglect, respectively, 0.78, 0.81, 0.72 and 0.74 acquired (4).

- *Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ)*: In order to evaluate preliminary maladaptive schemas, we used short questionnaire (75 questions) of Young Schema Questionnaire (1998) in this study that evaluates 15 preliminary adverse schemas in five fields (20). These schemas are: 1. abandonment/ instability 2.

mistrust/abuse, 3. emotional deprivation, 4. defectiveness/shame, 5. social isolation/ alienation, 6. dependence/incompetence, 7. vulnerability to harm or illness, 8. enmeshment/undeveloped self, 9. failure to achieve, 10. entitlement/grandiosity, 11. insufficient self-control/self-discipline, 12. subjugation, 13. self-sacrifice, 14. approval-seeking/recognition-seeking 15. negativity/pessimism, 16. emotional inhibition, 17. un-remitting standards/hypercriticalness, 18. punitiveness. Each question is marked by a six-option scale (1. completely incorrect, 2. mildly incorrect, 3. more correct than incorrect 4. fairly correct, 5. mildly correct, 6. completely correct). Each schema is evaluated using five questions in the short form. If the average score for each sub-scale is more than 25, the schema is inefficient. Reliability and validity of the instrument was proven in the research of Baranoff and Tian (21). Standardization of this study was done by Ahi in Tehran University. Ahi calculated internal homology using Cronbach's alpha of 0.97 in female and 0.98 in male population (22).

- *Coping Strategies Questionnaires of Billings and Moos (CSQ)*: Moos and Billings created this questionnaire in 1981 in order to analyze the response method of individuals to stressful situations. It initially consisted of 19 questions, whereas it evolved to 32 questions in the next revision; with reliability coefficient of 0.78 using split-half method (23). A thirty-two question questionnaire of Hosseini Ghadamgahi's revision was used in this study. The questionnaire evaluates the five coping strategies with Likert's four-level scale: problem-solving coping, emotional-restraint coping, cognitive-evaluation coping, physical-restraint coping and social-attraction coping strategies. Hosseini Ghadamgahi calculated the reliability coefficient of the retest as 0.79. Subscale reliability amounts for this study were as the following: Problem-solving coping  $r=0.90$ , Emotional-restraint coping  $r=0.65$ , Cognitive-evaluation coping  $r=0.90$ , Physical-restraint coping  $r=0.90$  and Social-attraction coping  $r=0.90$  (24).

To analyze the data, we used SPSS 19 software. In order to evaluate the correlation between childhood abuse experience and stress-coping strategies and preliminary adverse schemas, correlation coefficient, while significance tests were used to calculate their relative share in the four factors of (sexual, physical and emotional abuses and indifference). Multiple regression was used to specify variants (adverse schemas and coping strategies). In order to analyze the difference

between the variants of the two genders, independent T was used.

## Results

Among 318 participants surveyed with the mean and standard deviation of  $32.93 \pm 4.44$ , 192 were female with the Mean and Standard Deviation of  $32.84 \pm 4.51$  and 126 were male with the Mean and Standard Deviation of  $32.07 \pm 4.33$ . The sample's minimum and maximum age were 23 and 47 respectively. Descriptive index subscale scores of abuse, coping styles with stress and Early

Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs) in females and males as well as comparison of abuse scores (independent T-test) with coping styles with stress and Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMS) have been reported in Table 1. Multiple regression models were applied in order for coping styles with stress and Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs) to be predicted based on predictor variable (abuse Experience) (Table 2). The correlation between abuse and coping styles with stress and Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs) was evaluated with the employment of correlation matrix coefficient (Table 3).

**Table 1.** Descriptive indicators and independent T-test for studying abuse with coping styles with stress and Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs) among married men and women

Variables Indicators	Sex	N	Mean	Standard deviation	df	T	significance
Total abuse	Male	126	64.24	16.68	316	-2.11	0.03
	Female	192	66.22	18.89			
Physical abuse	Male	126	6.79	2.73	316	-2.13	0.03
	Female	192	7.51	3.04			
Emotional abuse	Male	126	21.75	6.01	316	-2.09	0.03
	Female	192	23.52	8.11			
total scores coping styles with stress	Male	126	38.71	10.60	316	-2.41	0.01
	Female	192	41.77	11.30			
problem-solving	Male	126	4.54	2.10	316	-1.94	0.04
	Female	192	4.90	1.91			
emotional inhibition	Male	126	5.51	4.87	316	-2.15	0.03
	Female	192	6.90	6.05			
Total scores Early Maladaptive Schemas	Male	126	172.87	46.06	316	-1.96	0.04
	Female	192	177.76	48.89			
Mistrust/Abuse	Male	126	11.56	4.27	316	-2.02	0.03
	Female	192	10.77	4.01			
Dependence/Incompetence	Male	126	9.54	4.69	316	-2.31	0.02
	Female	192	10.82	4.89			
Vulnerability to Harm or Illness	Male	126	10.25	5.46	316	2.05	0.04
	Female	192	9.90	5.20			
Emotional inhibition	Male	126	11.26	4.77	316	-1.94	0.04
	Female	192	12.35	5.36			
Entitlement/Grandiosity	Male	126	14.70	6.14	316	-2.09	0.04
	Female	192	15.44	5.78			

The results embodied in table 1 are indicative of a meaningful difference between males and females regarding abuse total score and sexual and emotional abuse subscales. The following results presented in table 1 show that another meaningful difference is found among male and female participants regarding the coping styles with stress

total scores as well as subscales of problem-solving and emotional inhibition methods. These meaningful differences among male and female participants are also observed in the cases of mistrust/abuse, dependence/incompetence, vulnerability to harm or illness, emotional inhibition and entitlement/grandiosity subscales.

**Table 2.** Correlation matrix between abuse subscales and coping styles with stress and Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
1. Abuse total score	1																										
2. Emotional abuse	.77**	1																									

3.	Negligence																							
4.	Physical abuse																							
5.	Sexual abuse																							
6.	Total scores coping styles with stress																							
7.	Problem-solving																							
8.	Emotional-restraint																							
9.	Cognitive-evaluation																							
10.	Physical-restraint																							
11.	Social-attraction																							
12.	Preliminary maladaptive schemas																							
13.	Emotional deprivation																							
14.	Abandonment/Instability																							
15.	Mistrust/Abuse																							
16.	Social isolation/Alienation																							
17.	Defectiveness/Shame																							
18.	Failure																							
19.	Dependence/Incompetence																							
20.	Vulnerability to harm or illness																							

21. Enmeshment/Undeveloped self	.39**	.22**	.23**	.42**	.36**	.34**	-.02	.35**	-.13*	.40**	.11*	.72**	.49**	.53**	.41**	.58**	.55**	.49**	.61**	.48**	1						
22. Subjugation	.36**	.22**	.23**	.40**	.30**	.21**	-.12*	.29**	-	.36**	.01	.72**	.47**	.49**	.43**	.49**	.57**	.58**	.47**	.59**	.64**	1					
23. Self-sacrifice	-.07	-.01	-.01	-.05	-.06	.12*	.14*	.10	.24**	-.07	.14*	.37**	.29**	.16**	-.05	.18**	-.02	-.07	-.05	.06	.16**	.13**	1				
24. Emotional inhibition	.08	.02	-.03	.06	.10	.22**	.10	.18**	.06	.12*	.07	.66**	.44**	.42**	.15**	.34**	.30**	.29**	.27**	.28**	.28**	.36**	.44**	1			
25. Unrelenting Standards/Hypercriticalness	-.06	-.08	-.02	-.05	-.04	.25**	.12*	.16**	.16**	.10	.11	.45**	.17**	.37**	.09	.04	.10	.08	-.04	.15**	.09	.13*	.45**	.57**	1		
26. Entitlement/Grandiosity	.07	.02	.01	.09	.03	.26**	.14**	.19**	.17**	.18**	.06	.57**	.28**	.13*	.14**	.20**	.26**	.18**	.06	.20**	.25**	.21**	.47**	.55**	.63**	1	
27. Insufficient self-control/Self-discipline	-.03	-.04	-.02	-.04	-.04	.34**	.13*	.30**	.15**	.21**	.08	.53**	.27**	.24**	.26**	.26**	.29**	.24**	.22**	.26**	.18**	.21**	.27**	.48**	.34**	.53**	1
Mean	64.88	11.97	7.22	22.82	22.26	40.55	4.76	13.15	10.21	6.35	5.93	175.8	10.59	12.61	11.69	11.00	9.55	9.68	10.31	10.04	11.02	10.20	14.46	11.92	16.13	15.15	11.93
Standard deviation	18.	4.4	2.9	7.3	7.4	11.	1.9	4.7	3.7	5.6	2.7	47.	4.4	4.3	4.3	5.2	4.8	5.1	4.8	5.3	5.5	4.9	6.2	5.1	5.5	5.9	4.4

**Table 3.** Multiple regression coefficients for various abuse types and predictor variables in summary

Predictor variable	Criterion variable	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	B	Beta	T	Significance
Abuse total score	Preliminary maladaptive schemas	0.30	0.09	32.43	0.80	0.14	5.69	0.000
Emotional abuse					-0.66	-0.06	-0.82	0.41
Negligence		0.35	0.12	10.49	-0.89	-0.05	-0.74	0.45
Physical abuse					1.91	0.29	3.61	0.000
Sexual abuse					1.04	0.16	2.42	0.01
Abuse total score	coping styles with stress	0.12	0.01	5.15	0.07	0.12	2.27	0.02
Emotional abuse					0.14	0.05	0.74	0.45
Negligence		0.23	0.05	4.68	0.43	0.11	1.48	0.13
Physical Abuse					0.26	0.16	1.83	0.03
Sexual Abuse					-0.25	-0.17	-2.46	0.01

The results of Table 3 represent that abuse total score with the Beta coefficients of respectively ( $P<0.000$ , Beta=0.14) and ( $P<0.02$ , Beta=0.12) is able to predict the coping styles with stress and Early Maladaptive Schemas. Considering the acquired Beta coefficients, it is evidenced by the following results of the table above that among the four abuse subscales, emotional abuse subscale ( $P<0.000$ , Beta=0.29) and negligence ( $P<0.05$ , Beta=0.16) would be capable of predicting Early Maladaptive Schemas. These two subscales can predict coping styles with stress as well.

**Discussion**

The present study investigates the relationship between child abuse and coping styles with stress and early maladaptive schemas; taking results, a meaningful difference is found between two genders regarding sexual and emotional abuses. These results prove that exposure to abuse is more for females than males and this can be the reason behind their different schemas. Differences observed in this study between female and male participants in the cases of coping styles with stress and Early Maladaptive Schemas are much in line with what was proven in Rajabi and Qamari's study, which demonstrated that abused and non-abused women have different coping styles with stress (25).

These results also concur with the results of Rostami et al study suggesting differences among women and men's sexual, emotional and physical abuses (15).

The results are indicative of two positive meaningful relationships; one between coping styles with stress and all the four abuse subscales and the other between cognitive assessment methods and emotional inhibition and one negative relationship as well between problem-solving methods and social support gaining, therefore these results correspond with those found in O'Leary's research in which coping and comparing strategies of men abused as children were studied (26). Thabeta et al have devoted their study to the investigation of childhood mistreatment experiences and coping styles with stress in adolescent boys living in Gaza strip the results of which corresponds with this study (27). The research conducted by Rostami et al in Iran has demonstrated that problem-solving methods and social support seeking have a meaningful relationship with all the four subscales regarding surveyed female participants (15). In addition, Rajabi and Qamari proved a higher rate of emotional inhibition usage by abused women compared to non-abused ones. The results of both these researches concur with what is proven in the current study (25).

The results showed that a positive significant relationship is observed between abuse total score and the four abuse subscales and early maladaptive schemas total score in the studied sample. A positive significant relationship was observed in the calculated correlation coefficients between scales of sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and negligence and schemas of abandonment/instability, mistrust/abuse, social isolation/alienation, defectiveness/shame, dependence/incompetence, failure, vulnerability to harm or illness, enmeshment/undeveloped and subjugation. This study denoted the existence of a positive relation between physical abuse and schemas of imperfectness/embarrassment, dependency/incompetency, compliance, entanglement and obedience. The research conducted by Muris regarding studying of early maladaptive schemas in a sample including 173 participants led to some conclusions which agree with the present study results. In the mentioned research a relation was observed between Early Maladaptive Schemas and misbehaviors (28). Cicero, Nelson and Gillie demonstrated the existence of a relation between child abuse and emotional inhibition methods and also with schemas such as mistrust, abandonment, emotional

deprivation, social isolation, and compliance and obedience as adolescents (11). The study conducted by Fulingstad and Rogers has also proved that abused women establish a meaningful relationship with such maladaptive schemas. Conformity is seen between the results of these two studies and what is found in this study (29).

Results showed that abuse total score is able to predict these coping styles with stress and Early Maladaptive Schemas. Emotional abuse and negligence subscales are able to predict coping styles with stress and Early Maladaptive Schemas as well. In Gi et al research in which a group of man exposed to abuse as children were studied, Early Maladaptive Schemas proved as predictors of the levels of abuse in adulthood and similar results were concluded too (30).

What Taft et al concluded in their research proved that abuse could predict coping styles with stress among women (31). If people who have experienced being abused, abandoned, forgotten or neglected as children consider their present life events similar to those harmful childhood experiences, then the maladaptive schemas are likely to be aroused. Having aroused these schemas, they might undergo negative emotions including grief, embarrassment, fear and anger. In order not to experience severe and frustrating emotions, painful childhood experiences give rise to some responses and maladaptive coping strategies, which coincide with maladaptive schemas (13). Experiencing an early maladaptive schema during childhood can be a clear example of a threat which itself is a kind of failure in meeting the child's basic needs. A child confronting a threat might cope with the situation by the help of a mixture of freezing, war and escaping-avoidance as coping strategies. He/she can avoid, surrender or compensate in an extreme manner (10). Since applying coping strategies ensures the continuity of early maladaptive schemas, thus the child finds some of these strategies as he/she grows up. Even the transformation of life situation and provision of better opportunities cannot stop these strategies from existing. Early maladaptive schemas make the person imprisoned behind the walls of such schemas ultimately (20).

Reviewing research findings and other similar studies confirms the fact that having surrendered to these schemas, people never try to stand against or escape from them and simply accept them as true. They feel the emotional pain of schema directly; though act in a way, which would confirm the authenticity and accuracy of schemas. Being unaware of what they are doing, these people

unconsciously repeat further schema-driven patterns in a manner, which revives, would childhood experiences in adulthood as well. They make emotionally inappropriate responses while encountering schema provokers and undergo their emotions thoroughly and consciously (10). There were some limitations such as inappropriate corporation with the researchers.

## Conclusion

Considering the findings of this study, we can conclude that families use emotional abuse and indifference leverages for children more than the other factors. These behaviors play vital roles in the future of the children, which may lead to the creation of adverse schemas as well as emotional coping strategies.

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