

Investigating childhood adversity

Researchers are trying to understand how maltreatment in childhood might contribute to the development of psychosis in early adulthood.

Dr Helen Fisher from the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, analysed information collected from 182 people who had had a first episode of psychosis and 246 people with no experience of mental ill health. The analysis showed that people who had psychosis were three times more likely to report severe physical abuse from their mother before they reached their 12th birthday than the 'control' group of people.

It also showed that people with psychosis were not more likely to have experienced abuse from their father.

Helen stressed that only a minority – just over 12 per cent – of people who had experienced psychosis had also experienced physical abuse from their mother. 'Not everyone who is abused in childhood will go on to suffer psychosis, and only a small percentage of people who have psychosis suffered abuse in childhood,' she said.

'If maternal abuse during childhood is a contributing factor to the development of psychosis, it is one of many contributing factors, and only for a small proportion of people.'

This is one of the first studies to search for more detailed information about abuse during childhood that may have been experienced by people with psychosis. Further research now needs to be carried out to find out more about this potential association between physical abuse during childhood from a mother and psychosis in early adulthood, said Helen.

'If there is an association, we then need to find out why it occurs. Is it to do with a mother being the most significant person in a child's life? Is it because physical abuse can cause damage to a developing brain or alter the child's perception of the world? Does cortisol – the 'stress' hormone – have something to do with it? Could maltreatment in childhood directly lead to increased paranoia or hearing voices?

'If we know there is an association, and why that association is there, we could in future design services that target and take account of people's experiences, and perhaps ultimately be able to intervene at an early age to help stop psychosis developing in young people who have experienced abuse of this nature.'

In addition, people who were abused in childhood may have problems trusting health professionals and building a therapeutic relationship. 'A proportion of people will have had adverse experiences in childhood that impact on them as adults and any services they are offered – for psychosis or other mental health problems – should take account of that,' she said.

Helen used information collected for the Medical Research Council-funded AESOP (Aetiology and Ethnicity in Schizophrenia and Other Psychoses) study from people living in London and Nottingham. AESOP is tracking people who experienced a first episode of psychosis over a 10 year period in a bid to find out more about psychosis and people's use of mental health services.

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