Impact of domestic violence on women's mental health
The need to prevent not just physical but mental scars too

MONTREAL, March 31, 2015 – In addition to their physical injuries, women who are victims of domestic violence are also at a greater risk of mental health problems such as depression and psychotic symptoms. These are the findings of a study that was just published by a team of researchers at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience at King’s College London in England, the Institut universitaire en santé mentale de Montréal (IUSMM), and the University of Montreal.

“We studied the impact of domestic violence on the risk of mental health problems, particularly depression,” explained Isabelle Ouellet-Morin, first study author and a researcher at the Institut universitaire en santé mentale de Montréal. “We also studied the role of certain factors from the victims' personal history, such as childhood abuse and economic poverty,” explained Ms. Ouellet-Morin, who is also a professor at the School of Criminology at the University of Montreal.

1,052 mothers participated in the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study over 10 years. Only subjects with no previous history of depression were considered for the study. Over this decade, the researchers conducted multiple interviews to determine whether the subjects had suffered violence from their spouses and whether they suffered from mental health disorders.

Results
• More than one third of the women reported suffering violence from their spouses (e.g., being pushed or hit with an object).
  o These women had a more extensive history of childhood abuse, abuse of illicit substances, economic poverty, early pregnancy, and an antisocial personality.
  o They were twice as likely to suffer from depression, even when controlling for the impact of childhood abuse.
  o Domestic violence had an impact not just on mood but on other mental health aspects as well. These women had a three times higher risk of developing schizophrenia-like psychotic symptoms. This risk doubled for women who were also victims of childhood abuse.

“Domestic violence is unacceptable because of the injuries it causes. We have shown that these injuries are not only physical: they can also be psychological, as they increase the risk of depression and psychotic symptoms,” added Louise Arseneault, a researcher at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience at King’s College London. “Health professionals need to be very aware of the possibility that women who experience mental health problems may also be the victims of domestic violence and vice versa. Given the prevalence of depression in these victims, we need to prevent these situations and take action. These acts of violence do more than leave physical damage; they leave psychological scars as well,” concluded Dr. Arseneault.
Source

The research has been fund by the United Kingdom Medical Research Council, by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK), by the United State National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and National Institute of Mental Health (USA).

Author information

1 Researcher at the Institut universitaire en santé mentale de Montréal and professor at the School of Criminology at Université de Montréal. Research scholar with the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

2 Researchers affiliated with the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience at King’s College London, England.

3 Professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, and the Institute for Genome Sciences and Policy at Duke University in North Carolina, United States.

The University of Montreal is officially known as Université de Montréal.

Information

Catherine Dion
Communications Department – Institut universitaire en santé mentale de Montréal
Phone: 514-251-4000, extension 2986 – Cell.: 514-235-4036
catherine.dion.iusmm@ssss.gouv.qc.ca

Jack Stonebridge
Press Officer, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King’s College London
Phone: 020 7848 5377 | jack.stonebridge@kcl.ac.uk