

Title:

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Drug Disorders: Testing Causal Pathways

Source:

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Conclusion:

Drug abuse or substance abuse disorders in people that have been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) might be the result of efforts on their part to self medicate, masking the symptoms of the PTSD. The researchers could not rule out that there may be some kind of connection between individuals who vulnerable for both PTSD and substance use disorders.

Purpose:

The medical community acknowledges a high degree of co-occurrence of PTSD and other psychiatric disorders. The authors were specifically looking at the co-occurrence of PTSD and substance abuse. There was little data prior to the research to help determine whether or not PTSD (or exposure to traumatic incidences) had a causal relationship with later substance abuse, or if substance abuse put people at greater risk for suffering a traumatic incident and/or PTSD. ***(Note: Observational Studies cannot determine causality but the authors did use statistically analysis to rule out some elements that would make ruling out other hypothesis more favorable).

The researchers used a long- term study that followed over a thousand adults between twenty-one and thirty years of age. They assessed them in 1989, 1992, and 1994. All of the individuals had psychiatric disorders according to the DSM diagnostic criteria. The study was to determine associations between PTSD and drug disorders.

Findings:

The authors set out to find the answers to three questions: (1). Does PTSD increase the risk of subsequent drug use disorder? (2) Does preexisting drug use disorder increase the risk of subsequent exposure to traumatic events? And (3) Does preexisting drug use disorder increase the risk of PTSD after a traumatic event? The analysis found that preexisting PTSD does increase the risk of drug abuse/dependence. The greatest drug abuse/dependence appeared to for their prescription medication, rather that alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, or “street drugs”. There was no evidence that exposure to traumatic events (in the absence of PTSD) increases the risk of drug abuse/dependence. Preexisting drug dependence/abuse had a very slight increase that PTSD would develop after a traumatic event.

This study did find that PTSD increase the risk of complications due to prescribed psychoactive medications. What was not known in this study was whether or not the drugs that were being abuse were the ones originally prescribed to treat the PTSD or were prescribed to treat other psychiatric symptoms.

Implications for Prevention:

Several unanswered questions in this study would caution preventionists before developing programming to address this issue. More research should be done to determine the drugs that were actually being abused and what they were originally prescribed to treat. This programming that would most likely be educational campaigns to make clinicians, physicians and treatment centers aware of the linkages between PTSD and substance abuse/dependence. Clinicians who would screen for PTSD or would work with clients diagnosed with PTSD should be targeted. Also primary care physicians should be notified to refer clients for proper counseling.

Summary Provided By:
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