

Posttraumatic Stress and Comorbid Emotional and Behavioral Problems in Sri Lankan Adolescents

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Abstract : Background: Comorbidity between posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychological problems is common. Recent studies focused to investigate the underlying relationship between PTSD and comorbid psychopathologies. Among adolescents, higher rates of emotional and behavioral problems (EBP) have been reported following trauma, often coexisted with PTSD. The current study, thus, examined the relationship of posttraumatic stress symptoms to EBP in adolescents exposed to a variety of traumatic events. Further, the study investigated the relationship of trauma and comorbid PTSS to the self-perceived negative impact of EBP on daily functioning. Methods: Participants were 729 Sri Lankan adolescents (age 12 to 16 years; 54.9% female) living in areas impacted in varying degrees by the 2004 tsunami. In 2008, school-based screening was conducted and completed measures of, trauma exposure, PTSS, EBP, and related functional impairment. Results: Participants reported a high prevalence of trauma exposure (n = 438), including interpersonal violence (n = 155). DSM-IV criteria for full or partial PTSD were met by 23.7% of the trauma-exposed sample. Across all participants, 13.4% and 16.7% displayed clinically relevant levels of EBP and functional impairment, respectively. Among the trauma-exposed, 7% met criteria for both EBP and PTSD. EBP total scores and caseness were significantly higher in trauma-exposed adolescents with PTSD than in either those without PTSD or the non-traumatized control group. In subscale analysis, higher prevalence of serious emotional, conduct, and hyperactivity problems were reported in the PTSD positive group; the PTSD negative group did not differ significantly from the control group on any of the problem scales. In regression analyses, PTSS ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) and interpersonal violence ($\beta = .13$, $p = .033$) were significant predictors of EBP, cumulative trauma ($\beta = .11$, $p = .076$) showed no significant effect. Further, PTSS exacerbated the impact of EBP on daily functioning ($\beta = 0.29$, $p = .023$). Conclusion: PTSS were closely linked to EBP in adolescents, even years after the traumatic experience. PTSD and emotional and behavioral problems together pose a heightened risk for impaired daily functioning. Longitudinal studies are needed to clarify the causal pathway.

Keywords : adolescents, comorbidity, emotional and behavioral problems, functional impairment, posttraumatic stress, traumatic events

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