



Research report

The association between childhood maltreatment and emotion regulation: Two different mechanisms contributing to depression?



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ABSTRACT

Background: Childhood maltreatment is an established distal risk factor for later emotional problems, although research suggests this relationship is mediated by proximal factors. However, it is unclear if different forms of childhood maltreatment are related to unique emotion regulation strategies. In this study, we examined whether avoidance and rumination, two emotion regulation strategies strongly associated with depression, were associated with different forms of childhood maltreatment, and whether these strategies, in turn, mediated the relationship between childhood maltreatment and current depressive symptoms.

Methods: Participants were a community sample of pregnant, primarily low-income women, 55 of whom met criteria for Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and 85 who had elevated levels of depressive symptoms but did not meet criteria for MDD.

Results: Significant rates of childhood maltreatment were reported. Childhood emotional neglect was related to behavioural avoidance, and childhood emotional abuse was related to rumination. In path analyses, behavioural avoidance mediated the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and depression. Rumination was a partial mediator of childhood emotional abuse and depression.

Limitations: The data were correlational in nature, and replication with a larger sample will help validate the model.

Discussion: In a clinical, community-based sample different types of childhood maltreatment are related to unique emotion regulation strategies. Implications for understanding the developmental antecedents of emotion regulation and depression are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Depression is a common, disabling and recurrent condition, affecting between 10–17% of women in a given year (Kessler et al., 2003), and over 60% of individuals who recover from depression will experience another episode within 5 years (Solomon et al., 2000). Because of the psychological, social and economic costs associated with depression, it is important to develop a better understanding of factors related to depression.

Childhood maltreatment (e.g., emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and emotional and physical neglect) is a widespread problem, affecting between 3 and 32% of the population (Briere and Elliott, 2003; Brown et al., 1998). It has been consistently linked to an increased risk of depression in adulthood (Agid et al., 1999; Kessler et al., 2001), and is related to an elevated risk of developing recurrent

and chronic depression (Nanni et al., 2012). Further, in a meta-analysis, Nanni et al. (2012) found that childhood maltreatment was associated with poor response to treatment for depression.

Researchers have conceptualised childhood maltreatment as a distal risk factor that triggers the development of proximal maladaptive cognitive and behavioural styles that, in turn, leave the individual vulnerable to psychological dysfunction (i.e., depression; Brown et al., 2008). The childhood years are thought to be a critical period for the development of emotion regulation skills Eisenberg et al. (2010), or processes through which individuals modulate their emotions both consciously and nonconsciously (Bargh and Williams, 2007; Rottenberg and Gross, 2003) so that they can effectively respond to environmental demands (Gross and Muñoz, 1995). The uncontrollable, emotionally painful and unpredictable nature of abusive and neglectful environments create conditions that undermine the child's development of efficacious behaviours, and may serve to promote ineffective emotion regulation strategies that have a later negative impact on emotional functioning (Briere and Jordan, 2009; Spasojević and Alloy, 2002; Shields and Cicchetti, 2001). We therefore sought to examine

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the mediating role of emotion regulation strategies in the relationship between women's reports of childhood maltreatment and their depressive symptoms.

Emotion Regulation Strategies: In a recent meta-analysis of six trait emotion regulation strategies (acceptance, avoidance, problem solving, reappraisal, rumination and suppression), associated with psychopathology, [Aldao et al. \(2010\)](#) found that avoidance and rumination had the largest (negative) effect sizes associated with depression. Because we were specifically interested in emotion regulation strategies that were most strongly related to depression, we focused on rumination and avoidance as key mediators of the relationship between childhood maltreatment and adult depression. We hypothesised that, because abuse and neglect present behaviour-specific demands on the child, different forms of maltreatment would be related to unique emotion regulation strategies. We explore the evidence for the hypothesised relationships below.

Behavioural avoidance, defined as behavioural attempts to reduce environmental events that are emotionally punishing, has been widely studied in the depression literature (see [Aldao et al., 2010](#) for a review). However, there has been little research specifically investigating the relationship between childhood maltreatment and behavioural avoidance. This is surprising, as the literature on behavioural avoidance suggests it is particularly likely to occur in environments with low positive reinforcement, and high levels of negative reinforcement and punishment ([Manos et al., 2010](#)). These are characteristics endemic to abusive, and in particular, neglectful environments. Classic studies of child maltreatment provide evidence that child maltreatment may be associated with behavioural avoidance. For example, in a series of classic studies, neglected children were typically withdrawn in social interactions with peers (e.g., [Erickson et al., 1989](#); [George and Main, 1979](#)), and children who were physically abused were primarily avoidant in their attachment ([Belsky, 1997](#)). However, to date we are unaware of any studies that have examined the association between childhood maltreatment and behavioural avoidance as an emotion regulation strategy. We posited that behavioural avoidance would be especially likely to be associated with emotional and physical neglect, because consistent low levels of positive reinforcement would firstly fail to provide the child with learning about approaching and tolerating emotions, and would instead model behavioural withdrawal and avoidance as a mechanism through which to reduce emotional and physiological arousal.

We hypothesised that childhood maltreatment contexts that were marked by the inconsistency, manipulation and uncertainty associated with emotional and sexual abuse would be related to rumination as an emotion regulation strategy. Consistent with other theoretical accounts ([Conway et al., 2004](#); [Spasojević and Alloy, 2002](#)), we posited that emotional and sexual abuse create environments where the child may need to adopt a passive style that is also hypervigilant to environmental threats that are outside the child's control. Such an environment may reduce opportunities for problem-solving, and increase internal focus ([Conway et al., 2004](#)). Instead, the developing child may passively focus on attempts to anticipate unpredictable outcomes, balancing the need to prepare for the worst against the alternate possibility of equivocal outcomes ([Borkovec, 1994](#)).

Research on depressive rumination, which is defined as a repetitive focus on the causes and consequences of experiences and emotions ([Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008](#)), broadly supports this hypothesis. A growing body of research has demonstrated that rumination is associated with a history of childhood emotional and sexual abuse ([Barnhofer et al., \(2007\)](#))([Spasojević and Alloy, 2002](#)). Brooding, the maladaptive component of rumination, has also been identified ([Treyner et al., 2003](#)). Brooding is defined as a “passive comparison of one's current situation with some unachieved standard” and reflection is defined as, “a purposeful turning

inward to engage in cognitive problem solving to alleviate one's depressive symptoms” ([Treyner et al., 2003, p. 256](#)). There is a considerable body of research linking brooding rumination with the onset and maintenance of depression (see [Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008](#) for a review). [Raes and Hermans \(2008\)](#) found that brooding, but not reflection, mediated the relationship between emotional abuse and concurrent depressive symptoms. Thus, brooding may be a particularly useful construct through which to understand and examine the relationship between childhood maltreatment and depression, specifically emotional and sexual abuse and depression.

Lastly, there is growing evidence that rumination is a cognitive form of avoidance that is associated with behavioural avoidance ([Eisma et al., 2013](#); [Moulds et al., 2007](#)). Brooding rumination may directly result in behavioural avoidance as an effect of remaining internally focused. Reciprocally, individuals who are attempting to behaviourally avoid uncomfortable contexts and emotions, may instead engage in rumination as a way to appear to be engaged in coping by “trying to solve my problems” ([Lyubormirsky et al., 1999](#)). We therefore expected that although rumination and behavioural avoidance would be uniquely correlated with different childhood maltreatment contexts, they would also be correlated with one another.

1.1. The current study

The majority of previous studies of childhood maltreatment have used adolescent and university populations. Many studies also often focus either solely on childhood abuse, or childhood emotional abuse and emotional neglect, without considering all forms of maltreatment together. Although adolescent and university populations represent an excellent opportunity to understand the role of childhood maltreatment during a transitional age period, such studies also often report lower rates of physical and sexual abuse than those described in epidemiological studies ([Hussey et al., 2006](#); [Kingston et al., 2013](#)). This may be in part due to the restricted sociodemographic range of the study sample. Further, few of these studies have examined the impact of childhood maltreatment in a clinical sample. These studies may consequently be limited in the extent to which they can fully examine the impact of different types of maltreatment, particularly less frequently occurring forms of maltreatment, on more proximal mechanisms of emotion regulation and emotional distress. In the current study, we drew from an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse group of both nondepressed and clinically depressed community women in order to maximise the generalisability of our findings. We also considered both childhood abuse and neglect variables.

1.2. Hypotheses

- (1) We hypothesised that different forms of childhood maltreatment, a distal vulnerability factor, would be associated with depression via unique proximal emotion regulation strategies. We predicted both childhood neglect and abuse would be related to current depressive symptoms. We expected that neglect, constituting an environment of consistently low levels of reinforcement would be related to behavioural avoidance and that abuse, which is characterised by inconsistency and ambiguity, would be related to brooding, but not reflection. Consistent with previous literature, we hypothesised that reflection would not be related to any of the childhood maltreatment variables.
- (2) As demonstrated in [Fig. 1](#), we hypothesised that behavioural avoidance would mediate the relationship between childhood neglect and depressive symptoms, and that brooding would mediate the relationship between childhood abuse and current depressive symptoms.

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