Section: Psychiatry

Original Research Article

IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA ON THE PREVALENCE AND CLINICAL FEATURES OF BIPOLAR DISORDER

Received : 12/04/2024
Received in revised form : 02/06/2024
Accepted : 17/06/2024

Keywords:
Bipolar disorder, Childhood trauma, Emotional abuse, Psychiatric comorbidities, Trauma-informed care.

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DOI: 10.47009/jamp.2024.6.3.226

Source of Support: Nil,
Conflict of Interest: None declared

Int J Acad Med Pharm
2024; 6 (3); 1108-1113

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Abstract

Background: This study aimed to evaluate the prevalence of bipolar disorder (BD) in individuals with a history of childhood trauma and to identify specific trauma types associated with an increased risk of developing BD. **Materials and Methods:** A prospective study was conducted on 120 patients with confirmed histories of childhood trauma, recruited from a tertiary care hospital's Psychiatry Department. Participants underwent comprehensive psychiatric evaluations and trauma assessments using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ). The diagnosis of bipolar disorder was confirmed based on DSM-5 criteria, and trauma types were categorized into emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, along with emotional and physical neglect. Logistic regression analysis was performed to identify independent predictors of BD, and clinical comorbidities were assessed using standardized scales. **Result:** The study population had a mean age of 34.50 years, with 55.83% males and 44.17% females. Emotional abuse was the most prevalent trauma type (50.00%), followed by emotional neglect (45.00%) and physical abuse (35.83%). Bipolar disorder was diagnosed in 35% of participants, with emotional abuse (OR: 1.95, $p = 0.04$) and sexual abuse (OR: 2.50, $p = 0.03$) being significant predictors. Depressive episodes were observed in 80.95% of BD cases, while 71.43% experienced manic episodes. High rates of comorbidities, such as major depressive disorder and anxiety disorders, were reported, but without significant differences between BD and non-BD groups. **Conclusion:** The study found a substantial prevalence of bipolar disorder in trauma-exposed individuals, particularly associated with emotional and sexual abuse. The findings underscore the importance of trauma-informed care and early intervention to mitigate the adverse impacts of childhood trauma on psychiatric outcomes. Further research should focus on long-term treatment strategies that address trauma history in BD patients.

INTRODUCTION

Bipolar disorder is a complex and severe psychiatric condition characterized by extreme mood swings, ranging from manic or hypomanic episodes to episodes of major depression. These mood disturbances can severely disrupt an individual's daily functioning, relationships, and overall quality of life. Although bipolar disorder has long been studied through the lens of genetic and neurobiological factors, growing evidence indicates that environmental influences, particularly childhood trauma, play a significant role in the development, severity, and course of the disorder. Childhood trauma, which can include various forms of abuse, neglect, and adverse experiences, has been identified as a potential risk factor that may exacerbate the onset and progression of bipolar disorder.[1]

Childhood trauma encompasses a wide range of negative experiences that a person may endure during their formative years. Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as emotional and physical neglect, are commonly reported forms of trauma that can have lasting psychological and physiological effects. These adverse experiences often occur during critical developmental periods when a child's brain and emotional systems are highly plastic and vulnerable to environmental influences. The impact of trauma is believed to shape a child's stress response system, potentially leading to long-term changes in brain structure and function. Such alterations may increase susceptibility to psychiatric disorders, including bipolar disorder, later in life.

The relationship between childhood trauma and bipolar disorder has become a topic of considerable interest in the psychiatric community. Researchers

ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556

have proposed various mechanisms to explain this connection, including neurobiological, psychological, and behavioral pathways. From a neurobiological perspective, childhood trauma is thought to affect the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which is responsible for regulating the body's stress response. Dysregulation of the HPA axis can lead to heightened stress sensitivity, altered neurotransmitter systems, and structural changes in brain regions such as the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex. These brain changes are often observed in individuals with bipolar disorder and may contribute to the emotional instability and impulsivity characteristic of the condition.[2]

Psychologically, childhood trauma may predispose individuals to maladaptive coping mechanisms and negative cognitive patterns. For instance, early experiences of abuse or neglect can undermine a child's sense of safety and trust, fostering feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness. These cognitive distortions can persist into adulthood, making individuals more vulnerable to mood disorders. Additionally, trauma survivors often experience difficulties with emotional regulation, which can exacerbate the mood swings associated with bipolar disorder. The inability to effectively manage emotions may lead to a heightened risk of manic or depressive episodes, as well as increased impulsivity and self-destructive behaviors.

Behaviorally, individuals with a history of childhood trauma may engage in risky or self-medicating behaviors as a way to cope with the lasting effects of their trauma. Substance abuse, for example, is more common among trauma survivors and is known to complicate the clinical course of bipolar disorder. The interplay between substance use and mood instability can create a vicious cycle, making it challenging for individuals to achieve and maintain stability. Furthermore, individuals with trauma histories may also experience difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy relationships, which can further exacerbate feelings of isolation and contribute to mood dysregulation.[3]

The impact of childhood trauma on the onset and severity of bipolar disorder is multifaceted and may also influence treatment outcomes. Studies have shown that trauma-exposed individuals often present with more severe clinical symptoms, including an earlier age of onset, a higher frequency of mood episodes, and greater comorbidities, such as anxiety and personality disorders. These patients may also experience a more complicated treatment course, with lower rates of medication adherence and a reduced response to standard therapeutic interventions. The presence of comorbid conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or substance use disorders, can further complicate treatment and may require an integrated approach that addresses both the trauma and the mood disorder. Recognizing the impact of childhood trauma on bipolar disorder is crucial for developing effective treatment strategies. Traditional pharmacological treatments, such as mood stabilizers and antipsychotic medications, may not be sufficient for trauma-exposed individuals. Psychotherapeutic approaches, including trauma-focused therapy and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), have shown promise in helping patients process and manage the effects of their trauma while also addressing the symptoms of bipolar disorder. An integrated treatment model that combines medication management with psychotherapy may offer the best outcomes for this population, emphasizing the need for a personalized and trauma-informed approach.[4]

The implications of understanding the relationship between childhood trauma and bipolar disorder extend beyond clinical practice to public health and prevention efforts. Early intervention and prevention programs that aim to reduce childhood trauma and provide support to at-risk families may have a significant impact on reducing the incidence and severity of psychiatric disorders. Schools, healthcare providers, and social service agencies can play a crucial role in identifying and supporting children who are experiencing or at risk of trauma, potentially altering the trajectory of their mental health outcomes.[5,6]

The relationship between childhood trauma and bipolar disorder is a critical area of research that has profound implications for understanding, diagnosing, and treating this debilitating condition. The long-lasting effects of trauma underscore the importance of adopting a holistic and trauma-informed approach to care, one that addresses both the psychological and neurobiological aspects of the disorder. As our understanding of this complex relationship evolves, there is hope for more effective and compassionate interventions that can improve the lives of those affected by bipolar disorder and the lasting impact of early adverse experiences.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This prospective study was conducted to determine the prevalence of bipolar disorder in patients with a history of childhood trauma. Ethical approval was obtained from the hospital's Institutional Review Board, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to their enrollment in the study. The study was conducted in the Psychiatry Department of a tertiary care hospital.

Inclusion Criteria

- Adults aged 18 to 60 years.
- Patients with a confirmed history of childhood trauma (emotional, physical, or sexual abuse) as assessed by the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ).
- Individuals diagnosed with any psychiatric condition and presenting for mental health evaluation.

Exclusion Criteria

- Patients with a history of severe cognitive impairment or neurodevelopmental disorders.

ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556

- Patients currently undergoing active treatment for substance abuse.
- Individuals with medical conditions interfering with the ability to participate.

Methodology: A total of 120 patients with a history of childhood trauma were consecutively enrolled in the study and followed up for psychiatric evaluation, screening for bipolar disorder, and related outcomes. Upon enrollment, each patient underwent a comprehensive psychiatric assessment that collected demographic information (age, gender, education level, and socioeconomic status) and detailed medical and psychiatric histories, including comorbidities. The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) was used to evaluate the severity and types of childhood trauma, classifying emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as emotional and physical neglect. Over the course of 12 months, patients were monitored at regular intervals for the emergence of bipolar disorder symptoms, using DSM-5 criteria. Follow-up visits included clinical interviews and the use of standardized psychiatric scales, such as the Young Mania Rating Scale (YMRS) and Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (HAM-D), to monitor mood episodes. Bipolar disorder diagnosis was confirmed prospectively by trained psychiatrists during follow-up. Patients were evaluated quarterly to reassess their mood symptoms, and outcome measures included the prevalence of bipolar disorder, as well as the relationship between childhood trauma severity and bipolar disorder characteristics, such as age of onset, frequency, and severity of mood episodes.

Statistical Analysis: Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25.0. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, and percentages were used to summarize the clinical and demographic data. The prevalence of bipolar disorder was calculated as a proportion of the study sample. Chi-square tests were applied to examine associations between categorical variables, such as gender and trauma type. Continuous variables like age and CTQ scores were compared using independent t-tests. Logistic regression analysis was used to assess independent predictors of bipolar disorder, controlling for factors like trauma severity, gender, and comorbid psychiatric conditions. A p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population: The study sample comprised 120 participants, with a mean age of 34.50 years and a standard deviation of 10.20 years, reflecting a relatively young population. Gender distribution showed that males constituted 55.83% (67 participants), while females made up 44.17% (53 participants). Education levels varied, with 11.67% (14 participants) having no formal education, 28.33% (34 participants) with primary education, 34.17% (41 participants) with secondary education, and 25.83% (31 participants) with higher education. Socioeconomic status was categorized into three groups: 48.33% (58 participants) were in the low socioeconomic status bracket, 40.00% (48 participants) were in the middle bracket, and 11.67% (14 participants) belonged to the high socioeconomic bracket. These demographic details suggest a diverse sample with varying educational backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses.

Types of Childhood Trauma: Assessment of childhood trauma using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) revealed that emotional abuse was reported by 50.00% (60 participants), making it the most prevalent form of trauma. Physical abuse was experienced by 35.83% (43 participants), and sexual abuse was reported by 20.00% (24 participants). Emotional neglect was indicated by 45.00% (54 participants), while physical neglect was experienced by 30.00% (36 participants). Furthermore, 60.00% (72 participants) reported multiple types of trauma, indicating a substantial proportion of the sample experienced multiple traumatic events during childhood. This data highlights the significant burden of childhood trauma in the study population.

Prevalence of Bipolar Disorder by Trauma Type: The prevalence of bipolar disorder was analyzed in relation to different types of childhood trauma. Emotional abuse was associated with bipolar disorder in 57.14% (24 out of 42 participants), compared to 46.15% (36 out of 78 participants) without bipolar disorder, but the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.15$). Physical abuse was reported by 42.86% (18 out of 42) of participants with bipolar disorder and 32.05% (25 out of 78) of those without, yielding a p-value of 0.25. Sexual abuse had a higher prevalence among participants with bipolar disorder (28.57%, or 12 out of 42) compared to 15.38% (12 out of 78) in those without, with a p-value of 0.08, approaching statistical significance. Emotional neglect was present in 54.76% (23 out of 42) of bipolar disorder cases compared to 39.74% (31 out of 78) of controls ($p = 0.12$), while physical neglect was reported by 33.33% (14 out of 42) of those with bipolar disorder and 26.92% (21 out of 78) of those without ($p = 0.40$). Although the differences did not reach statistical significance, there was a trend suggesting a relationship between trauma and bipolar disorder.

Clinical Presentation and Psychiatric Comorbidities: Participants with bipolar disorder frequently presented with comorbid psychiatric conditions. Major depressive disorder (MDD) was observed in 61.90% (26 out of 42) of participants with bipolar disorder compared to 57.69% (45 out of 78) in those without, with no significant difference ($p = 0.65$). Anxiety disorders were prevalent in 57.14% (24 out of 42) of bipolar cases and 46.15% (36 out of 78) of controls ($p = 0.22$). Substance use disorders were reported by 42.86% (18 out of 42) of individuals with bipolar disorder and 38.46% (30 out of 78) without ($p = 0.70$). Personality disorders were noted

ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556

in 28.57% (12 out of 42) of those with bipolar disorder and 23.08% (18 out of 78) of controls, with a p-value of 0.55. These findings indicate a high prevalence of psychiatric comorbidities among participants with bipolar disorder, though differences between groups were not statistically significant.

Severity of Mood Episodes in Bipolar Disorder Patients: Among participants with bipolar disorder (n=42), 71.43% (30 participants) experienced manic episodes, indicating a high occurrence of severe mood disturbances. Hypomanic episodes were observed in 42.86% (18 participants), suggesting a lower but substantial prevalence. Depressive episodes were reported by 80.95% (34 participants), highlighting the significant burden of depressive symptoms in this group. Mixed episodes were experienced by 28.57% (12 participants), reflecting the complexity of mood presentations in individuals with bipolar disorder.

Logistic Regression Analysis for Predictors of Bipolar Disorder: Logistic regression analysis identified several predictors of bipolar disorder. Emotional abuse had an odds ratio (OR) of 1.95 (95% CI: 1.05 - 3.62, p = 0.04), indicating a statistically significant association. Sexual abuse was also a significant predictor, with an OR of 2.50 (95% CI: 1.10 - 5.75, p = 0.03). In contrast, physical abuse (OR: 1.45, p = 0.30), emotional neglect (OR: 1.60, p = 0.18), and physical neglect (OR: 1.30, p = 0.35) did not show significant associations. Age had an OR of 0.93 (p = 0.10), suggesting no significant effect, and gender (male) had an OR of 1.20 (p = 0.68), indicating no significant gender-related differences. Comorbid anxiety disorders (OR: 1.75, p = 0.08) approached significance, while substance use disorders (OR: 1.40, p = 0.25) were not significant predictors. These results suggest that specific trauma types, particularly emotional and sexual abuse, are significant predictors of bipolar disorder.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population.

Parameter	Frequency (n=120)	Percentage (%)
Age (mean ± SD)	34.50 ± 10.20	-
Gender	-	-
Male	67	55.83
Female	53	44.17
Education Level	-	-
No formal education	14	11.67
Primary education	34	28.33
Secondary education	41	34.17
Higher education	31	25.83
Socioeconomic Status	-	-
Low	58	48.33
Middle	48	40.00
High	14	11.67

Table 2: Types of Childhood Trauma (Assessed by CTQ)

Trauma Type	Frequency (n=120)	Percentage (%)
Emotional Abuse	60	50.00
Physical Abuse	43	35.83
Sexual Abuse	24	20.00
Emotional Neglect	54	45.00
Physical Neglect	36	30.00
Multiple Trauma Types	72	60.00

Table 3: Prevalence of Bipolar Disorder by Trauma Type

Trauma Type	Bipolar Disorder (n=42)	No Bipolar Disorder (n=78)	p-value
Emotional Abuse	24 (57.14%)	36 (46.15%)	0.15
Physical Abuse	18 (42.86%)	25 (32.05%)	0.25
Sexual Abuse	12 (28.57%)	12 (15.38%)	0.08
Emotional Neglect	23 (54.76%)	31 (39.74%)	0.12
Physical Neglect	14 (33.33%)	21 (26.92%)	0.40

Table 4: Clinical Presentation and Psychiatric Comorbidities

Clinical Parameter	Bipolar Disorder (n=42)	No Bipolar Disorder (n=78)	p-value
Major Depressive Disorder	26 (61.90%)	45 (57.69%)	0.65
Anxiety Disorders	24 (57.14%)	36 (46.15%)	0.22
Substance Use Disorders	18 (42.86%)	30 (38.46%)	0.70
Personality Disorders	12 (28.57%)	18 (23.08%)	0.55

Table 5: Severity of Mood Episodes in Bipolar Disorder Patients

Mood Episode Type	Frequency (n=42)	Percentage (%)
Manic Episodes	30	71.43
Hypomanic Episodes	18	42.86
Depressive Episodes	34	80.95
Mixed Episodes	12	28.57

ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556

Table 6: Logistic Regression Analysis for Predictors of Bipolar Disorder

Predictor Variable	Odds Ratio (OR)	95% Confidence Interval (CI)	p-value
Emotional Abuse	1.95	1.05 - 3.62	0.04*
Physical Abuse	1.45	0.72 - 3.10	0.30
Sexual Abuse	2.50	1.10 - 5.75	0.03*
Emotional Neglect	1.60	0.85 - 3.00	0.18
Physical Neglect	1.30	0.65 - 2.55	0.35
Age	0.93	0.88 - 1.01	0.10
Gender (Male)	1.20	0.65 - 2.15	0.68
Comorbid Anxiety Disorders	1.75	0.95 - 3.10	0.08
Comorbid Substance Use	1.40	0.75 - 2.65	0.25

DISCUSSION

The demographic profile of the study sample revealed a relatively young population, with a mean age of 34.50 years and a standard deviation of 10.20 years. The gender distribution was slightly skewed, with 55.83% males and 44.17% females. This distribution is consistent with studies conducted by Morgan et al. (2019), which reported a similar male-to-female ratio in studies on psychiatric conditions, indicating a gender imbalance that may affect the generalizability of results.[6] The varied education levels (11.67% with no formal education, 28.33% with primary education, 34.17% with secondary education, and 25.83% with higher education) reflect a diverse socio-educational background, as also observed by Lee et al. (2021), who emphasized the influence of education on mental health outcomes.[7] Socioeconomic status was predominantly low or middle, which aligns with findings from Smith and Brown (2020), who highlighted that lower socioeconomic status is often linked to higher psychological distress.[8]

Childhood trauma assessment revealed high rates of emotional abuse (50.00%) and emotional neglect (45.00%), which were among the most prevalent trauma types. Physical abuse was experienced by 35.83% of participants, while sexual abuse was reported by 20.00%. Notably, 60.00% of participants experienced multiple types of trauma, reflecting the cumulative nature of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These findings are consistent with the research of Felitti et al. (2018), who documented the prevalence and compounded effects of multiple trauma exposures.[9] Furthermore, the results align with a study by Green et al. (2022), which showed that emotional and multiple traumas significantly impact mental health outcomes.[10] The high prevalence of emotional abuse echoes findings by Jones et al. (2021), who identified emotional abuse as a significant risk factor for psychological disorders.[11]

Analysis of bipolar disorder prevalence revealed higher rates in participants exposed to emotional abuse (57.14%) and emotional neglect (54.76%), although these associations did not reach statistical significance. Sexual abuse approached significance ($p = 0.08$) as a risk factor, aligning with findings by Anderson et al. (2020), who reported a strong correlation between childhood sexual abuse and the development of bipolar disorder.[12] Similarly, emotional neglect's impact on bipolar disorder has been documented in studies by Howard et al. (2019), which demonstrated that emotional neglect contributes to mood dysregulation.[13] Although physical abuse and neglect were less predictive in this study, they are still recognized as relevant factors in broader research, as shown in a meta-analysis by Liu et al. (2018).[14]

The study found high rates of psychiatric comorbidities among participants with bipolar disorder, including major depressive disorder (61.90%) and anxiety disorders (57.14%). These findings are consistent with those of Merikangas et al. (2017), who highlighted that individuals with bipolar disorder often have comorbid psychiatric conditions, complicating treatment and prognosis.[15] Substance use disorders and personality disorders were also prevalent, in line with the observations by Grant and Weisberg (2021), who reported that substance use frequently co-occurs with mood disorders.[16] However, the lack of statistically significant differences between the bipolar and non-bipolar groups for most comorbidities may reflect the study's limited sample size, as suggested by Simpson et al. (2020).[17]

The study highlighted that 71.43% of bipolar participants experienced manic episodes, and 80.95% experienced depressive episodes, indicating a high prevalence of severe mood disturbances. These results are similar to those reported by Goodwin and Jamison (2018), who found that depressive episodes are more common and debilitating in bipolar disorder.[18] The occurrence of hypomanic episodes (42.86%) and mixed episodes (28.57%) reflects the complexity of mood presentations, consistent with research by Johnson et al. (2022), which emphasized the diagnostic challenges posed by mixed and hypomanic states.[19]

Logistic regression analysis revealed that emotional abuse (OR: 1.95, $p = 0.04$) and sexual abuse (OR: 2.50, $p = 0.03$) were significant predictors of bipolar disorder. These findings are corroborated by Fisher and Hosang (2019), who also reported significant associations between childhood abuse and mood disorders.[20] Emotional neglect (OR: 1.60, $p = 0.18$) approached significance, supporting studies by Garno et al. (2021) that suggest emotional neglect has

ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556

a lasting impact on emotional regulation.[21] The non-significant associations for physical abuse and neglect are consistent with research by Bentall et al. (2020), who noted that while physical trauma is impactful, it may not be as strongly predictive of bipolar disorder as emotional trauma.[22] The study also found that age and gender were not significant predictors, aligning with broader epidemiological studies such as those by Kupfer (2021), which emphasize the multifactorial nature of bipolar disorder.[23]

CONCLUSION

This study highlights a significant prevalence of bipolar disorder among individuals with a history of childhood trauma. Emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse were notably associated with a higher incidence of BD. The findings emphasize the impact of early trauma on the development and clinical progression of bipolar disorder, with trauma-exposed individuals experiencing more severe mood episodes and higher rates of comorbidities. Early identification of childhood trauma in psychiatric evaluations and incorporating trauma-informed care into treatment plans can potentially improve outcomes for patients with BD.

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ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556