

There have been several studies done to demonstrate a correlation between individuals who have had traumatic experiences who later develop eating disorders.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is often a co-occurrence with persons who suffer from an eating disorder. Those who have experienced traumatic events may engage in an eating disorder to self-manage the feelings and experiences related to PTSD.

Particularly with child sexual abuse (CSA), there has been a large amount of research related to the effect of CSA on body image. It is believed that 30% of individuals with an eating disorder have been sexually abused. Some researchers connect the large association of self-harm with victims of CSA and other traumas to those with eating disorders. There tends to be a strong view that body shame sparks a large amount of eating disorders related to CSA. The body shame might trigger habits geared toward destroying the body of which the victim is so ashamed, resulting in starvation, purging, or binge eating, depending on the manifestation of the eating disorder. Eating disorders related to sexual abuse are also viewed as a coping mechanism similar to those who engage in other self-harming activities.

Those at high risk for eating disorders because of trauma include:

- Victims of sexual abuse, particularly those who suffered at a younger age
- Victims or observers of domestic violence
- Those who suffer from PTSD

Bulimia, in particular has been connected to trauma as a means of self-protection, because the binge/purge cycle of behaviors seem to reduce awareness of thoughts and emotions as a means of escape for several of the emotions that may accompany traumatic experiences such as anger, guilt, need to cleanse oneself of the experience and refocus, stress, need for control and predictability, and need for personal space.

Treatment of individuals suffering from an eating disorder should receive care for both his/her eating disorder as well as his/her traumatic experiences. If the trauma is not addressed during the treatment of an eating disorder, successful recovery will be extremely difficult, since the eating disorder may have developed as a method of self-defense for the victim. Important factors contributing to the success of treatment can include positive reactions to disclosure about a traumatic event, as well as strong support from family and friends.

Sources:

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