

Wright, M.O., Crawford, E., & Del Castillo, D. (2009). Childhood emotional maltreatment and later psychological distress among college students: the predicting role of maladaptive schemas. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 33, 59-68.

Objective: Theoretically, exposure to experiences of emotional abuse (EA) and emotional neglect (EN) in childhood may threaten the security of attachment relationships and result in maladaptive models of self and self-in-relation to others. The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which EA and EN treatment by parents contributed uniquely to young adult maladaptive long-term outcome with respect to symptoms of anxiety, depression, and dissociation. The extent to which the relationships between EA and EN and later symptoms were mediated by specific internalized maladaptive interpersonal schemas was also explored.

Methods: Questionnaires completed by 301 college men and women (52% female) assessed perceptions of experiences of childhood abuse and neglect, exposure to parental alcoholism, current symptoms of psychological distress, and endorsement of maladaptive interpersonal schemas.

Results: Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that perceptions of childhood EA and EN each continued to exert an influence on later symptoms after controlling for gender, income, parental alcoholism, and other child abuse experiences. Both EA and EN were associated with later symptoms of anxiety and depression and were mediated by schemas of vulnerability to harm, shame, and self-sacrifice. Only EN was related to later symptoms of dissociation; this relationship was mediated by the schemas of shame and vulnerability to harm.

Conclusion: The findings are discussed from an attachment perspective, focusing on how early interactions with parents contribute to the development of internal working models of self and self-in-relation to others that influence later cognitive schemas and psychological adjustment. Practice implications: Although emotional abuse and emotional neglect are the least studied of all forms of child maltreatment, they may be the most prevalent. The current findings suggest that how college students have evaluated and internalized these experiences may be even more important than the events themselves in determining the extent to which these experiences exert a long-term impact. For this reason, early intervention might be particularly important in helping to modify internal working models of the self as worthless, others as abusive, or the world as threatening and dangerous as a result of past abuse experiences. This study underscores the need for counselors to actively elicit and explore experiences of emotional abuse and neglect in clients, in addition to inquiring about other abuse experiences and types of family dysfunction. The results of this study also support existing data suggesting that internalized representational models of self and others are a key mechanism underlying the relationship between emotional maltreatment and later psychopathology. Young's schema questionnaire proved to be quite sensitive in detecting specific maladaptive schemas that mediated later difficulties with depression, anxiety, and dissociation. Targeting these negative schemas in therapy may help to ameliorate such symptoms. The therapeutic relationship provides a particularly effective context for developing more positive models of self and others, as well as providing a context to explore core relationship themes across different relationship contexts (e.g., intimate partner, parent, friend, and work relationships). In particular, if the assessment of the client reveals that dissociative symptoms are present, counselors can acknowledge the adaptive function

that this strategy once served, while also addressing potential limitations to over-reliance on this coping strategy.