Childhood maltreatment and alcohol problems in young adulthood: coping style as a mediator and potential intervention target

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Introduction and aims: Children exposed to maltreatment (abuse, neglect) are twice as likely to develop a substance use disorder (SUD) compared to those not exposed. Better understanding of the mechanisms linking exposure to SUD is needed to develop effective prevention. One proposed mechanism is how maltreated children cope with subsequent stressors throughout life. The current study aimed to investigate whether avoidant coping strategies (e.g., denial, distraction, or using substances to cope) mediated the relationship between childhood maltreatment and young adult alcohol use, using longitudinal data.

Design and Methods: Young Australians were recruited through social media, provided informed consent, and completed three surveys online, each approximately one year apart. At baseline, participants reported on experiences of maltreatment before age 18. At Wave 2, participants reported their use of avoidant coping strategies. At Wave 3, alcohol use problems were assessed with the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT). Multiple imputation was used to handle missing data. Mediation analyses were run in SPSS, controlling for socio-demographics and other adverse childhood experiences.

Results: The sample comprised 568 participants, mean age 21.39, 70% female. Maltreatment predicted greater avoidant coping and greater alcohol problems. Avoidant coping predicted greater alcohol problems. Avoidant coping significantly mediated the relationship between childhood maltreatment and alcohol problems, accounting for 70% of this relationship.

Discussion and Conclusions: Young adults exposed to childhood maltreatment may use more avoidant coping strategies to deal with stressors, and these strategies may fuel greater alcohol use problems. Interventions to reduce avoidant coping may help to prevent alcohol use problems among young adults exposed to childhood maltreatment.

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