

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Impact of Multi-Type Childhood Abuse on Psychological Development and Coping Strategies among Perdana University Students

Nurin Sarah Noor Azaf¹, Kyshanty Vizabaskaran¹, Kanakeswary Karisnan¹, Anne Noor Sri Juwaneeta Jamaludin^{1,2,3}

¹ Perdana University – Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (PU-RCSI), Perdana University, Suite 9.2, 9th Floor, Wisma Chase Perdana, Changkat Semantan, Damansara Heights, 50490 Kuala Lumpur.

² Monash University Malaysia, Jalan Lagoon Selatan, 46150 Bandar Sunway, Malaysia.

³ HELP University, Wisma HELP, Jalan Dungun, Bandar Damansara, 50490 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Childhood abuse is a worrisome societal issue as it becomes largely prevalent worldwide, with associated mental and behavioural consequences on the victims. Cases of child violence, mostly owing to its heavy stigma, are seldom recorded. This study aims to investigate the prevalence of multi-type childhood abuse (physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and neglect), its relation to victims' psychological development and coping strategies utilized by them. **Methods:** The study was conducted on 121 participants from Perdana University using self-administered questionnaire. **Results:** Emotional abuse was a recurrent form of abuse (43.8%) experienced by young adults in Perdana University, followed by physical abuse (15.7%), neglect (6.6%) and sexual abuse (2.5%). Hence, leading to significant negative effects on the victims' psychological status. Majority of the participants had a Normal scale of Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS), followed by a Moderate scale of DASS. Neglect and maltreatment predominantly contributed to participants' depression ($rs=0.313$), anxiety ($rs=0.378$) and stress ($rs=0.382$) levels. Abused victims commonly utilized the method of disengagement, specifically emotion-focused disengagement coping strategy (99.2%). **Conclusion:** Screening of students' mental health pre-enrolment and throughout years of university studies aids in early intervention and support such as counselling services to alleviate stress and develop positive coping skills. Execution of mentorship programmes fosters quality relationships and fashions comfortability for students to disclose any psychological trauma or abuse experience, plus requires regular revision to strengthen its implementation. Effective policies should be developed and enforced by child protection bodies and law enforcement agencies to impede childhood abuse and its influence among young adults.

Keywords: Child abuse, Coping strategies, Health psychology, Mental health, Adult survivors of child maltreatment

Corresponding Author:

Anne Noor Sri Juwaneeta Jamaludin, PhD

Email: annenoor.j@help.edu.my

Tel: +601165057277

INTRODUCTION

The tragedy of child abuse remains a huge concern as the consequences in adulthood can be devastating. This issue influences not just the victim, but also the community they reside under. The likelihood of more severe and damaging negative outcomes in adulthood may be increased by chronic or multiple types of victimization. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), child abuse is defined as "any form of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or any other exploitation that, in the sense of a relationship of responsibility, trust or control, leads to actual or

potential harm to the health, survival, development or dignity of the child" (1 pg. 1). It is reported that 40 million children of ages 0 to 14 years worldwide suffer from abuse, requiring urgent health and social care (2). Nearly 22.6% of adults experienced childhood physical violence, while 36.3% have undergone mental violence, and one in six children have endured physical neglect (16.3%), without significant disparity between genders (2,3). However, females are twice more vulnerable of sexual abuse (18.0%) than males (7.6%) in their lifetime (2,3). More than 95.0% of abuse victims were found to have faced multiple forms of abuse (4). In Malaysia, the lifetime prevalence for emotional abuse ranged from 13.5% to 72.3% and 1.8% to 63.3% for physical abuse (5,6). Based on Ahmed et al., 2015, prevalence of childhood abuse is significantly high in Malaysia especially due to parental physical abuse (7). Adolescents in Malaysia who experienced abuse, have undergone mental struggles such as stress, suicide

ideation, suicidal plans, or even suicide attempts (8).

Various fields of study have shown that childhood abuse has dysfunctional results in the victims including aggression, withdrawal, and depression (9). Multiple studies revealed that victims of multi-type abuse encounter substantial physical health implications and negative side-effects on their mental health status (10). Mental health issues can lead to depression, poor self-esteem and derangement which may have everlasting adverse effects on academic performance and employment prospects (11). In general, childhood abuse results in deviant sexual behaviour, difficulty handling social and psychological challenges, and rage in adulthood (12).

Stressful experiences such as abuse may influence the choice of coping strategies of an individual. Different methods of coping have contrasting impacts on psychological well-being (13–17). Strategies reflecting engagement coping (i.e. active confronting and reassuring thoughts) are associated with effective reduction of negative effects of stressor whereas disengagement coping (i.e. avoidance) are associated with poor perceived control over stressors (13).

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine the prevalence of multi-type childhood violence, to evaluate the impact of abuse on the severity of DASS, and to examine the coping strategies utilized by the victims of abuse.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted using a cross-sectional design and was carried out from January until March 2020 among Perdana University students. This study was approved by Perdana University Institutional Review Board Number PU-IRBH 0248.

Each student received a questionnaire comprising four sections: 1) demographics; 2) Comprehensive Child Maltreatment Scale (CCMS); 3) Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale – 21 Items (DASS-21); and 4) Coping Strategy Inventory – Short Form (CSI-SF). The demographics section included personal characteristics of the participant, including their age, ethnicity, religion, current year in university, dating status, parents' occupation, level of education and annual income. The CCMS segment contained 21 questions to determine vulnerability to physical violence, mental abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and maltreatment. The DASS-21 form included seven questions in each subset (Depression, Anxiety, Stress), constructed to assess the participants' emotional state of depression, anxiety and stress on a 4-point severity scale. The CSI-SF, containing 16 questions, was included to assess participants' positive and negative coping mechanisms.

Complex statistical analysis was conducted using statistical software IBM SPSS Version 23.0. Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient, r , was utilized to analyse the co-occurrence of multi-type childhood abuse and to study the relationship between multi-type abuse and DASS. In addition, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to assess internal consistency of DASS, was conducted (18).

Analytically, the scores of DASS-21 for each respondent were summed up and multiplied by two for each subset, in order for it to be comparable to the full normative data and other published data of DASS as DASS-21 is the shortened version of the original DASS scale. The severity scales (Normal, Mild, Moderate, Severe, Extremely Severe) for each subset were then defined for each participant based on their cumulative scores by using the recommended cut-off scores (19).

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

Hundred and twenty-one respondents composed of Perdana University students were included in the study. Table I demonstrates the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The participants were mainly young adults aged between 18 and 29 years old. The modal age group was 20-25 years, attributing 93.4% of cases. Most of the respondents were in their third year of study (33.9%). The majority of participants were of Indian ethnicity (39.7%) followed by Malay (29.8%), Chinese (20.7%) and Others (9.9%). In terms of religion, 34.7% were Hindus, 32.3% were Muslims, 13.2% were Buddhists, 9.1% were Christians, and the remaining 10.7% were of other religions. More than half of the respondents (58.7%) were not in a relationship, 22.3% were in a long-term monogamous relationship, 14.9% were dating casually, and 4.1% were engaged. Vast majority of the participants' fathers hold white-collar jobs, namely businessmen (14.0%), engineers (10.7%) and lecturers (6.6%). Meanwhile, the majority of mothers have pink-collar jobs namely housewives (24.0%), followed by white-collar jobs, particularly lecturers (19.8%) and the remaining are retired (9.1%).

Prevalence of Multi-Type Childhood Abuse

The majority of respondents reportedly never experienced either physical abuse (84.3%), emotional abuse (56.2%), sexual abuse (97.5%) or neglect (93.4%). Based on Fig. 1, emotional abuse leads as the most common type of abuse occurring among the Perdana University students with a prevalence of 43.8%, followed by physical abuse (15.7%), neglect (6.6%), and sexual abuse (2.5%). The frequency of each abuse experienced by the respondents was mostly once in a year with one third reported of experienced more than two forms of abuse (34%) and more than three forms of abuse (36%) as shown in Fig. 2.

Table I: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Categories	Number of respondents (n)	%
Age		
18 - 21	41	33.9
22 - 25	76	62.8
26 - 29	4	3.3
Level of study		
First year	14	11.6
Second year	31	25.6
Third year	41	33.9
Fourth year	3	2.5
Fifth year	32	26.4
Ethnicity		
Chinese	25	20.7
Indian	48	39.7
Malay	36	29.8
Others	12	9.9
Religion		
Buddhism	16	13.2
Christianity	11	9.1
Hinduism	42	34.7
Islam	39	32.2
Others	13	10.7
Dating status		
Not dating	71	58.7
Dating casually	18	14.9
In long term monogamous relationship (more than 6 months)	27	22.3
Engaged	5	4.1
Father's occupation		
White-collar jobs e.g. businessman, engineer, lecturer	78	64.5
Blue-collar jobs e.g. construction worker, contractor, electrician	16	13.2
Others e.g. self-employed, entrepreneur	12	9.9
Retired	15	12.4
Mother's occupation		
White-collar jobs e.g. lecturer	67	55.4
Pink collar jobs e.g. housewife	29	24.0
Others e.g. self-employed	14	11.6
Retired	11	9.1

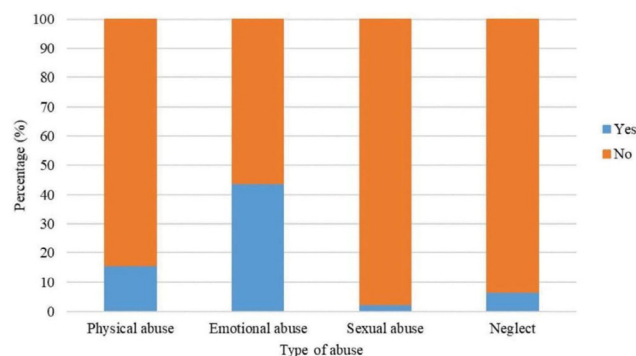


Figure 1: Distribution of abuse experienced by the students

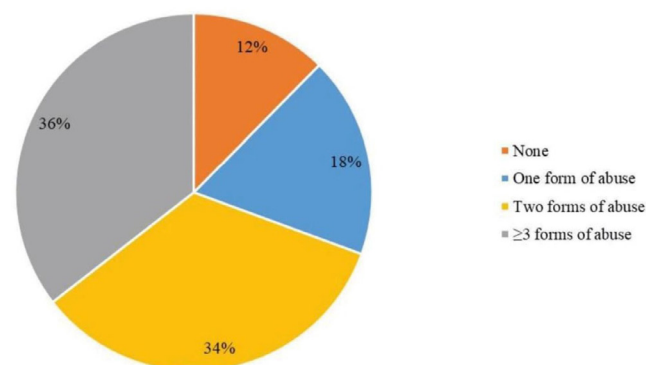


Figure 2: Number of abuses experienced by the students

On the contrary, mothers allegedly had a higher prevalence of eliciting abuse (physical, emotional, and neglect) with a cumulative score of 41.4% compared to fathers and others, based on Fig. 3. However, both mothers and fathers, as reported by participants, showed no data on sexual abuse towards their children while 11.1% reported experiencing sexual abuse from others. The highest frequency of emotional abuse elicited by the parents were yelling, ridiculing and humiliating, provoking and instilling fear, by mothers being 22.6% and fathers 19.9%.

To determine if the respondents who were exposed to one type of abuse were more likely exposed to other types of abuse, Spearman's rank order correlation coefficient test was conducted (Table II). There is a strong positive association between neglect and sexual abuse ($r=0.599$, $p<0.01$). Emotional abuse and sexual abuse were moderately correlated with physical abuse ($r=0.369$ to $r=0.397$). Weak correlation is seen between emotional abuse with sexual abuse and neglect as well as physical abuse with neglect ($r=0.181$ to $r=0.251$).

Impact of Multi-Type Childhood Abuse on Severity of DASS

Based on the data analysis conducted, a large portion of participants reported having a 'Normal' scale of

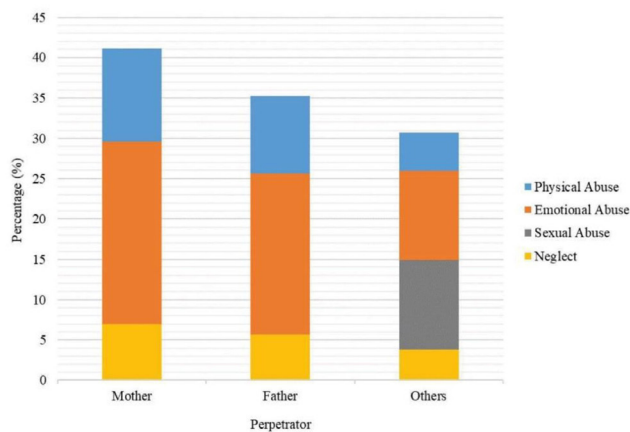


Figure 3: Perpetrators of multi-type abuse among the students

Table II: Spearman’s rank order correlation coefficient between types of abuse

	Spearman’s rank order correlation coefficient, r			
	Physical abuse	Emotional abuse	Sexual abuse	Neglect
Physical abuse				
Emotional abuse	0.397**			
Sexual abuse	0.369**	0.181*		
Neglect	0.251**	0.234**	0.599**	

**p-value <0.01; *p-value <0.05

DASS followed by a ‘Moderate’ scale of DASS. There is a rather significantly higher percentage of participants possessing a ‘Moderate’ scale of Anxiety (19.0%) as well as an ‘Extremely Severe’ scale of Anxiety (9.1%), in comparison to Depression and Stress.

Overall, there is satisfactory reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) of all three scales based on the yielded means, standard deviations and coefficients (Table III). Based on the minimum acceptable value for Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha=0.700$) and maximum expected value ($\alpha=0.900$), it can be concluded that the set of data for Depression, Anxiety and Stress are reliable and possesses internal consistency. Based on the Spearman’s correlation coefficient, there is a moderately positive correlation between all three DASS variables and neglect, followed by emotional abuse. Stress is moderately correlated with physical abuse ($r_s=0.313$), emotional abuse ($r_s=0.353$) and neglect ($r_s=0.382$). On the other hand, there is a weak statistical correlation between physical abuse and DASS.

Table III: Means, standard deviations, alpha coefficients and correlation between DASS and multi-type abuse

	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach’s alpha, α	Spearman’s correlation coefficient, r_s			
				Physical abuse	Sexual abuse	Emotional abuse	Neglect
DASS							
Depression	8.660	9.343	0.898	0.135	0.204*	0.314**	0.313**
Anxiety	8.281	7.717	0.802	0.169	0.232*	0.264**	0.378**
Stress	11.967	9.077	0.816	0.313**	0.210*	0.353**	0.382**

**p-value <0.01; *p-value <0.05

Based on Fig. 4, it can be concluded that emotional abuse had a huge impact on participants’ Depression, Anxiety and Stress severity scales, whereby 56.2% emotionally abused patients were under Depression, 54.8% under Anxiety and 54.1% under Stress. A large percentage of the participants (55.6%) who experienced multi-type abuse generated a ‘Normal’ scale of Depression. In terms of the ‘Moderate scale’ in Depression, 21.0% of the participants reported experiencing abuse and out of them emotional abuse had the highest contribution (8.4%) to the scale.

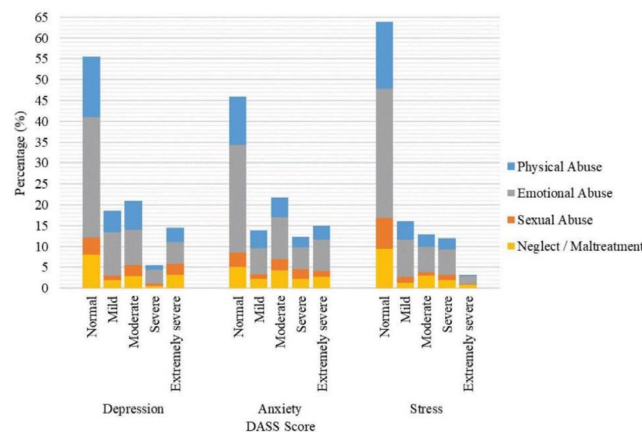


Figure 4: Distribution of DASS severity levels according to multi-type abuse

The largest percentage of participants (45.9%) have a ‘Normal’ scale of Anxiety. There is a significant spike in the ‘Moderate’ scale indicating larger percentages of participants that have experienced multi-type abuse, in comparison to the other scales (Mild, Severe, and Extremely Severe). There is a sharp decline in the relationship between the frequency of multi-type abuse and the severity scale of Stress whereby, Normal (63.9%), Mild (16.0%), Moderate (12.9%), Severe (12.0%) and Extremely Severe (3.2%).

Coping Strategies Associated with Multi-Type Abuse

This study found that engagement and disengagement coping strategies are utilized by the majority of the respondents, with emotion-focused disengagement coping strategy being the most (99.2%). The least common coping strategy utilized is emotion-focused engagement strategy (91.7%) whereas problem-focused disengagement and engagement strategies have the prevalence of 92.6% and 97.5% respectively. All four

coping strategies are most frequently utilized sometimes. Overall, disengagement coping strategies are most utilized among victims across all forms of abuse with the prevalence of more than half compared to engagement coping strategies (ranges between 50% - 54%). Engagement and disengagement strategies are almost equally utilised among emotional abuse victims (49.5% and 50.5% respectively). Neglect victims are more inclined to disengagement coping strategies the most (53.3%). Among victims of sexual abuse, equal utilization of engagement and disengagement coping strategies (50.0% each) are seen. Physical abuse victims utilize disengagement coping strategy (51.4%) more than engagement coping strategy (48.6%).

DISCUSSION

This study shows that the prevalence of child abuse is relatively prevalent (between 2.5% to 43.8%) among a representative population of the Perdana University students. However, emotional abuse is the commonest type of abuse experienced by the students. Students who have experienced abuse of a certain type were more likely to have experienced another type. Multi-type childhood abuse has significant negative effects on the victims' psychological status with increased severity levels of depression, anxiety and stress. The majority of the students utilized more than one type of coping strategy and abused individuals frequently resorted to the disengagement strategy. There is a strong association between disengagement coping strategy and sexual abuse and neglect.

Majority of the students reported experiencing more than one type of abuse during their childhood, similarly seen in a study reporting 22.1% of Malaysian adolescents experiencing multi-type abuse (6). A large proportion (51 out of 121) of the students were affected by emotional abuse among the multiple forms of abuse, based on the Comprehensive Child Maltreatment Scale (CCMS). Similarly, a cross-sectional study conducted in Malaysia reported a large prevalence of abuse, with emotional and physical abuse being the most frequent forms of child abuse (20). In another similar study, using the child abuse screening tool (ICAST), the incidence of emotional abuse was reported the highest compared to the other forms of child abuse (21). Another survey conducted in Czech Republic involving students from five Czech universities yields similar results, with emotional abuse being the most prevalent, followed by physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse (22). Constant pressure and untreated emotional issues may adversely impact an individual's psychological and behavioural development (23).

The prevalence of different types of abuse among university students in this study is comparatively lower than in the study by Mwakanyamale et. al. (24), who reported that 97.6% of the respondents experienced at

least one form of abuse. Lower prevalence compared to the present study has been found in other researches such as Christoffersen et. al. (25) who reported less than 5.0% prevalence of each abuse. These differences stem from variability in the size and type of population studied. Research conducted by Christoffersen et. al. (25) was by means of a structured interview compared to the present study and the study by Shi L. (26) applied a qualitative approach. To compare and contrast our study with the study of Shi L. (26), data was based on multiple questionnaires which could have contributed to the variation in findings.

Most published local studies addressed multi-type abuse independently, indicating assumptions were made about each type of abuse occurring in isolation. However, there is compelling evidence implying that more than one form of childhood violence frequently occur at once (27–29). Based on the current study, a significant association was found cutting across all types of abuse although correlation strengths varied between each abuse ($r=0.181$ to $r=0.599$). Sexual abuse and neglect have the strongest association between one another, while one of the weakest associations was seen between sexual abuse and emotional abuse. These findings are contrary to the data found in Sesar et. al. (30) whereby emotional abuse has the highest association with all other types of abuse. There is a need to highlight the importance of assessing the co-occurrence of other abuse among individuals experiencing a particular abuse. This approach is key in a clearer understanding of a child's abuse experience and its consequences that follow (31). Addressing the different types of abuse in isolation may be of use in a certain context, but it is equally important to approach the matter holistically to build effective prevention and intervention strategies (29).

Our study also revealed mothers having the highest frequency of eliciting multi-type abuse, followed by fathers and others. Several aspects could have played a role in leading to such instances. Bartlett et al., 2012 found that children born to younger mothers (≤ 21 years of age) or mothers with a history of abuse are at considerable risk of abuse or neglect (32) and another study showed that mothers commonly utilize physical abuse (spanking) to discipline their disobedient children (33). On the other hand, 52 out of 121 participants reported experiencing sexual abuse from others which could result in chronic mental and emotional emanations like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression due to childhood sexual trauma (34). Importantly, a study in Malaysia reported adult friends and relatives being the largest group (42.9%) of perpetrators of sexual abuse (6).

Multi-type childhood abuse was positively associated with detrimental mental status such as depression, anxiety, and stress. Based on this current study, 22 out of 121 students experienced extremely severe levels of

either depression, anxiety, stress, or a combination of the three. This can further affect their quality of life such as development of persistent health implications (35). Besides that, childhood abuse has reportedly presented with negative consequences on the income prospects and employment of an affected individual (36). Majority of the participants with severe scales of depression, anxiety and stress were victims of emotional abuse. The effects of emotional abuse, as seen in a research, revealed children who experienced emotional abuse, had poor academic performance, depression, low self-esteem and developed attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (37). Therefore, there is a need for further assessment and diagnostic tests including a more comprehensive screening for early detection and management to prevent such negative complications.

There are only a few studies which have investigated the relationship between coping mechanisms and abuse. In this study, majority of the respondents utilised more than one coping strategy since all types have the value of more than 90.0%. Among abused individuals, disengagement strategy was the most prevalent coping strategy employed, similar to findings in a study by Milojevich et. al. (38). Emotion-focused and problem-focused disengagement strategies were equally utilised among all abused individuals except among victims of emotional abuse who utilised emotion-focused disengagement strategy more than problem-focused disengagement strategy. The ability to recognize disengagement coping strategy, which is common among abuse victims, is vital due to its association with subsequent psychiatric symptoms (39).

As this study was based on a questionnaire inquiring about abuse and neglect, respondents may have been reluctant to address their private life which may have contributed to underreporting and underestimation of actual abuse. In the effort to overcome this limitation, the students were instructed to remain anonymous whilst answering the questionnaire. To date, published studies regarding similar issues have been conducted using different methods, contributing to inconsistent findings. The choice of tool in this particular research helps answer the research objectives using a quantitative approach which is more systematic rather than relying on one's opinion. However, the usage of different tools is important to highlight their merits and demerits in order to determine the best approach to this matter.

Preventative measures aimed at completely preventing childhood abuse as well as management of victims with childhood abuse should be strengthened, and has to be aligned with multiple non-governmental organizations' target to primarily eradicate such instances (40,41). Preventive measures proposed by the WHO were to implement legal reform and the human rights community, providing early childhood education and care, reducing economic inequalities by mitigating

poverty and abolishing unemployment, suppressing environmental risk factors such as alcohol availability (40). The focus in most countries has been on intervening and providing counselling and family therapy, once child abuse is detected. Child protection programs have therefore been enacted at the expense of attempts to avert abuse from occurring in the first place (42). Internet-based interventions (IBI) could also be introduced as it is easily accessible and can grasp a wider population whilst being comparatively economical. There are a few existing IBIs aimed at parent-child engagements (43) and Rheingold et al., 2012 addressed the power of the Internet as a channel to educate the public regarding child abuse (44).

CONCLUSION

Multi-type childhood abuse is common amongst Perdana University students. This issue accounts for a large financial impact on the community owing to expenses for child welfare, victims' physical and mental wellbeing, special education, and legal costs (45). Early recognition of circumstances in which child abuse is likely to arise is key in preventing the issue from emerging. Individuals with a history of abuse should be subjected to counselling as early as possible as it has associated negative effects on their depression, anxiety and stress levels. Hence, increasing the likelihood of poor adult mental health and other health-related issues. As most universities offer such services to their students, it is worth exploring different strategies to provide various mental health screening resources to all incoming and existing students. This further aids in identification of students engaged in negative coping strategies who will be guided in adopting positive coping strategies to manage their daily stressors. Adopting communitarian social work practice such as by encouraging reporting may help break this vicious cycle of child abuse in the society (46). Moreover, further studies should be conducted to explore the role of the media in emphasizing or investigating social norms pertaining to child abuse. Important lessons can be acquired from the media's position in promoting healthy or unhealthy habits in areas such as alcohol consumption, smoking, substance use, and contraceptive use which directly impacts the incidence of child abuse in most countries.

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