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Trauma & Substance Use

Kaitlyn Arnold
University of Southern Maine

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Abstract

An estimated 1.9 million people suffer from opioid use disorder alone in the United States (Opioid abuse, 2015). Out of that 1.9 million, the amount of individuals whom have experienced trauma is not available. However, a study was conducted concluding that those with substance use disorders were twice as likely as the general population to experience a traumatic event (Lawson, K., et. al. 2013). While the number of individuals with experienced trauma is so significant, there is a limited amount of trauma treatment available within rehab facilities. The researcher will be conducting a qualitative study by interviewing volunteer participants whom have a history of trauma and substance use. Their lived experiences will be documented to provide the *why* behind the connection between trauma and substance use, and highlight the need for appropriate services for trauma in rehab facilities. Trauma has everlasting effects that change people's lives and the way they live them. Services should be put in place to address the central cause that initiated the path of substance use so one can be validated and supported throughout their journey in recovery.

Introduction or Background

It is a well known matter that there is a connection between trauma and substance use, but do we know why? The researcher's purpose of this study is not to prove the connection, but demonstrate *why* there is a connection through individuals lived experiences.

Research Question

How is trauma and substance use connected?

Methods

- A qualitative study using a phenomenologist approach
- Approval from the IRB
- 2 Key informants
- A recruitment guide
- An interview guide
- 3, 20-30 minute interviews
- Transcribing, memoing, coding

Quotes from the lived experiences of participants

"It was just normalized, there's this thing in our society that says you had a long week you earned it, or whatever, like it's just kind of glorified, especially when you're in your early 20's to just go crazy. So I didn't really think anything was wrong."

"I was just putting alcohol in my body to numb other stuff and escape."

"Huh, yeah, none of the places I went to offered trauma counseling. I went through a couple different places and the first detox I went through was actually mental health and substance use combined, but even still they did trigger lists but the only thing they did do was try and diagnose other stuff, and some of the questions were pretty obvious about what they were trying to find out, so it was basically set up so you could lie."

"My use was about relief. The drugs and the alcohol not only made me feel physically good, you know the physical high, but also I had this voice in my head that was telling me I was a loser, nobody cared, I was wasting everyone's time, that I was going to screw up anyway, that I couldn't do it, and that I'd never go anywhere so just give up. So not only did the drugs and alcohol take that away, but they told me the exact opposite of that."

"I had a strange relationship with my Mom, she wasn't really around because she was in school so I felt kind of neglected and unwanted, that feeling just went through my whole childhood with my Dad as well. Growing up I just never wanted to be alone, so I would go to bars as often as I could just to be around other people."

Results

Findings demonstrate that there are numerous causes that influence the *why* and *how* between the connection of trauma and substance use. Each experience shared by the 3 participants was unique to that individual, while similar emotions were expressed. The traumas experienced were either on multiple occasions, on going, or one occasion. It was also found that there is a lack of trauma informed counseling services available in general and in rehab facilities.

Discussion/Conclusions

My research provides the answers to the numbers that show a positive correlation between trauma and substance use. There are feelings associated with a traumatic event and the desire to seek a solution for immediate relief. The trauma endured ranged from sexual, emotional, and physical abuse, to being a witness to trauma as well.

Themes that answer *how* their is a connection between trauma and substance use include a lack of available trauma informed counseling, internal shame, the desire to escape one's emotions, to use substance use as a numbing tool against unwanted feelings and thoughts, and the desire to be wanted. 2 out of 3 participants also noted that initially what they were partaking in felt normalized by society and that they could make it work. It was not until the choice of substance grew stronger or the doses increased that they recognized an issue with substance could be occurring. Even then, their experienced trauma was not confronted and treated. While 2 of the participants sought assistance through multiple rehab facilities, not one informed trauma treatment option was discovered from these participants. This can be seen as an issue for various reasons, the most significant being the impact that occurs within an individual after not properly confronting and coping with the experienced trauma. It was discovered and supported by the participants that the self medication theory and avoidance coping are 2 very prevalent events that took place in their lives upon their traumatic experiences. The quotes offered on the left are examples of the supported evidence of these theories.

Acknowledgements

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References

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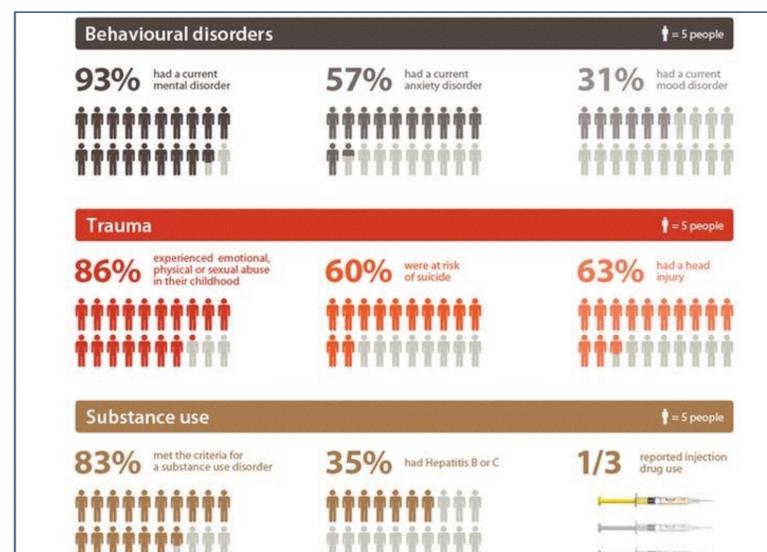


Figure 2. This graph demonstrates how common it is for individuals to experience trauma in their lifetime and how the number of substance use coincides.