

Men sexually abused in childhood 10 times more likely to contemplate suicide

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Sexual abuse in childhood increases the risk of suicide in men by up to ten times, say researchers from the University of Bath. A recent study of Australian men has found that those who were sexually abused as children are more likely than women to contemplate taking their own lives.

Whilst gender and mental health problems are the most important risk factors for contemplating suicide, it is increasingly acknowledged that traumatic experiences such as childhood sexual abuse may be a significant risk factor.

Dr Patrick O'Leary and Professor Nick Gould from the University's Department of Social & Policy Sciences conducted a series of surveys and face-to-face interviews with men in a study funded by the University of South Australia. The findings have been published online in the peer-reviewed *British Journal of Social Work*.

They found that men who were sexually abused as children were up to ten times more likely to have suicidal tendencies; many of these men had not been clinically diagnosed as depressed.

Dr O'Leary said: "Childhood sexual abuse is an under-recognised problem in men - most of the studies exploring the link with suicide have been in women.

"Men are particularly vulnerable because they don't like to talk to others about their problems. It's difficult for anyone to come to terms with traumatic experiences such as childhood sexual abuse, but for men the stigma is worse because they don't tend to confide in their friends as much.

"Many suffer feelings of failure and isolation and think that it is a sign of weakness to discuss their past abuse with others. Men also tend to visit their doctors less frequently, so those who are at risk of suicide often slip under the radar of the healthcare system.

"Men are particularly vulnerable to suicide and are three and a half times more likely than women to end their own lives, with more than 2,000 men dying as a result of suicide in the UK each year. However it is estimated that for every suicide, there are between 20 and 25 failed attempts.

"We carried out the study in Australia, which shares a similar 'stiff upper lip' culture that we see in the UK. We're planning to do our next study in the UK to see if there are any differences."

Dr O'Leary suggested that lives could be potentially saved if abuse victims are identified earlier.

He explained: "The abuse that these men have suffered as children often sees them attempting to cope by suppressing the experience through substance abuse, alcohol abuse and obsessive behaviour, with many ending up in the criminal justice system.

"Greater awareness in the healthcare and criminal justice systems will help identify those who are at risk and give them treatment before it is too late."

Source: University of Bath

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