

# Top Risk Factor for Mental Disorders Identified

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Early life adversity including neglect and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse is the single biggest risk factor for psychiatric disorders, new research suggests.

In what has been described as a seminal review, investigators at Dell Medical School in Austin, Texas, conclude that childhood maltreatment is "by far" the biggest contributing factor leading to impaired health in adults.



Charles Nemeroff, MD, PhD

Physically, early abuse is associated with reduced life expectancy due to higher risk for heart disease, [stroke](#), [obesity](#), diabetes, and certain forms of cancer, study co-author Charles Nemeroff, MD, PhD, professor and chair, department of psychiatry at Dell's Mulva Clinic for the Neurosciences, and director of its Institute for Early Life Adversity Research, told *Medscape Medical News*.

In terms of the psychiatric impact, "maltreatment increases the risk for [depression](#), [drug abuse](#), [suicide](#), [alcohol abuse](#), and it also worsens the course of all psychiatric disorders that have been looked at," Nemeroff added.

The paper [was published](#) in the January issue of the *American Journal of Psychiatry*.

**High Rates of Maltreatment an Underestimate?**

Shockingly, estimates show that about one in four children will experience abuse or neglect, although this might well be an underestimate as most cases of maltreatment go unreported.

"This is especially true for certain types of childhood maltreatment (notably emotional abuse and neglect), which may never come to

clinical attention but have devastating consequences on health independently of physical abuse and neglect or sexual abuse," Nemeroff and co-author Elizabeth Lippard, PhD, write.

Pointing to a recent meta-analysis showing that 46% of patients with depression experienced childhood maltreatment, the authors also note that up to 57% of patients with [bipolar disorder](#) also report high levels of childhood abuse and/or neglect.

The research also suggests childhood maltreatment is associated with poor treatment outcomes in patients with depression, [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD), or bipolar disorder.

These findings underscore the need for clinicians to conduct detailed evaluations of trauma history, said Nemeroff.

"It's extremely important for clinicians to get a detailed childhood trauma history of a patient so they know what they're dealing with. Many patients don't volunteer information, particularly during the first visit, about whether they have had any adverse early childhood experiences," he said.

"We need to try to understand how best to treat these patients because they don't respond well to conventional treatments — medication or psychotherapies," said Nemeroff.

Evolving research is examining the timing, duration, and severity of childhood maltreatment. Some studies suggest maltreatment earlier in life that continues for a longer period is associated with worse outcomes. However, the authors emphasize that exposure to maltreatment at any time during childhood significantly increases the risk for mood disorders.

The review also includes studies of the negative consequences of bullying. While there's some evidence to indicate that cyberbullying often precipitates suicide and that this appears to occur more often with women than men, said Nemeroff, much of the data in this area is "anecdotal."