



People that Are Abused by Their Family Members Need Specialized Treatments to Cope with Their Trauma

What is this research about?

Intrafamilial trauma is a form of abuse by one's family members. Victims of this trauma are at risk of developing mental health issues later in life. They often develop dismissive (avoidant) attachment. This leads victims to ignore or downplay negative feelings and memories about the family member that abused them. They do this to avoid pushing their abusive relatives away. Psychologists call this "defensive avoidance". Because many of these individuals are seriously affected by their trauma, they eventually seek treatment.

What did the researcher do?

Robert Muller, a York University researcher, aimed to improve the way that psychologists treat intrafamilial trauma patients. The researcher did the following:

- showed how dismissive attachment patients are different from other patient groups
- argued that these patients need to have their attachment system activated and their defensive avoidance challenged

What you need to know:

People who have experienced abuse by a family member have a hard time confronting these experiences in the future. Effective therapy requires the patient to bring up their painful experiences and also recognize that it was their family members who abused them.

- presented and discussed new treatment approaches

The researcher explored treatment strategies with victims of intrafamilial trauma. Patients that were included in this study had both experienced abuse by family members and showed the dismissing attachment pattern. Treatment was done over a 3 year period on 15 patients by the researcher who is an experienced clinical psychologist.

What did the researcher find?

After looking at the existing literature, the researcher found that patients with defensive avoidance are especially hard to treat. Despite looking for help, many can also be very defensive and see themselves as:

- Strong
- Independent
- self-sufficient

Earlier treatment theories and research showed that traditional therapy doesn't work well on these patients. The patients do see therapy as something they need. However, they are also threatened by therapy because it forces them to confront memories of abuse by a family member.

The researcher came up with a number of specific treatment approaches to address this issue. Dr. Muller found that activating the patient's defensive behaviour and then challenging it was important to effective treatment. He also observed a number of important treatment features. These features were:

- addressing the "I'm no victim" identity
- using symptoms as motivators
- listening for, noticing, and using ambivalence
- asking activating questions around themes of caregiving and protection.

How can you use this research?

This research will be useful to therapists working with patients who are victims of intrafamilial trauma. It shows how this is group different from other people seeking therapy and introduces specific treatment approaches tested on real patients. This research may also be useful to the work of community groups and organizations that assist victims of intrafamilial trauma.

About the Researcher

Robert Muller is an Associate Professor in the Psychology Department at York University. Dr. Muller also produces an academic blog entitled The Trauma and Attachment Report.

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Keywords

Attachment, Trauma, Psychotherapy, Avoidant, Dismissing

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