
This study investigates the association between objective and subjective characteristics of childhood sexual abuse and psychopathology in later life. The sample consists of 404 Dutch female adults who had been sexually abused in their childhood or adolescence. The participants were recruited by means of articles about childhood sexual abuse in major Dutch newspapers. The characteristics and severity of the sexual abuse were assessed with the Questionnaire Unwanted Sexual Experiences in the Past (QUSEP). General psychopathology was measured with the Symptom Checklist (SCL-90-R, Derogatis, 1977), the degree of dissociation was measured with the Dissociation Questionnaire (DIS-Q, Vanderlinden et al, 1993). Stepwise multiple regression analyses showed a moderate association between psychopathology and objective characteristics of the abuse, such as number of different types of abusive events and the duration of the abuse. However, more strongly associated with later psychopathology were variables reflecting coping style, such as the degree of self-blame, and circumstantial factors, such as the emotional atmosphere in the family of origin and the reactions following disclosure. Whether or not the abuse was incestuous did not explain additional variance in later psychopathology.
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