

## The relationship between negative childhood experiences and later appearance of drug addiction

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### ABSTRACT

Child abuse, maltreatment, and neglect are significant problems that are experienced universally regardless of culture, ethnicity, and social class. Similarly, drug addiction is also identified as a problem, globally. Previous research documents the relationship between the experiences of abuse in childhood with addiction later in life. Thus, the current study attempts to understand the influence of stressful or adverse childhood experiences on the development of drug addiction in the Sri Lankan context. Qualitative data was gathered to explore this relationship. A purposive sample of six male participants was selected from among 20 individuals identified as being addicted to drugs in the Welikada prison. Data was gathered using a semi-structured interview and analyzed through thematic analysis. The analysis found that adverse childhood experiences were reported by the participants and that these experiences were described as being triggers for the addiction. It was also found that these adverse childhood experiences have negatively affected their family life, education, and future aspirations. The study hopes to impact interventions in the case of negative childhood experiences and drug addiction.

**Keywords:** *Child, Negative Childhood Experiences, Drug Addiction*

Children are the most vulnerable group of human species. Child maltreatment has frequently been identified in the life histories of many adolescents. While physical abuse might be the most visible sign, other types of child abuse such as emotional abuse or neglect also leave deep, long-lasting scars. Hence, child abuse is a great problem that society should pay key attention to. Some studies suggest that adults who experienced child abuse become addicts of substance abuse (Elwyn & Smith, 2013). Drug addiction is one of the main social problems in the world. It is harmful to everyone. Many child abuse cases are reported in Sri Lanka and so many people who are addicted to drugs are arrested by the Sri Lankan police. There may be a link between child abuse and drug addiction. Some of the drug addicts may have been abused in their childhood. Hence, drug addiction can be an outcome of child abuse.

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### ***Child***

A child is a main component of society and the future of the world. There are many definitions of who a child is. A child is every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, adulthood is attained earlier (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990). According to the United States Immigration Law, a child refers to anyone who is under the age of 21. According to the Penal Code of Sri Lanka, a child is a person who is under 18 years (Squire & Wijeratne, December 2008).

### ***Negative Childhood Experiences***

Negative childhood experiences are described as stressful or traumatic situations, including abuse, maltreatment, parental abandonment, substance abuse by parents, poverty, and exposure to crime. Child abuse or child maltreatment (adverse childhood experience) is a universal and devastating social problem in the world. Child abuse is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes (Herrenkohl, 1990). According to the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) of Sri Lanka, child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power (National Child Protection Authority, Act. No: 50 of 1998). According to World Health Organization, child abuse and neglect sometimes referred to as child maltreatment, includes all forms of physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation that result in actual or potential harm to the child's health, development, or dignity. Within this broad definition, five subtypes can be distinguished; physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, and exploitation (World Health Organization, 2006).

Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of the United states define any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation as child abuse (Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). A Sri Lankan scholar defines child abuse as any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent or another caregiver of a child that results in harm/ potential harm, or threat of harm to a child (Kudagammana, 2010). These definitions explain that child abuse is a very broad category. Child abuse involves several academic disciplines such as Law, Sociology, Psychology, Medicine, etc. Research studies reveal that large numbers of children all over the world undergo physical, psychological, and sexual abuse daily. World Health Organization reports that each year more than 40 million children around the world are abused (WHO, 2002). The United Nations World report on violence against children reveals that 150 million girls, or 14% of the world's child population, and 73 million boys, or 7% of the world's child population, have been subjected to sexual violence (Pinheiro, 2006). According to sources from the NCPA of Sri Lanka, over 10,000 child abuse cases were reported in 2017 and 1,532 cases were reported within the first two months of 2018 (Inayathullah, 2018).

### ***Drug and Drug Addiction***

Drugs are defined as any substance that when taken into a living organism, may modify one or more functions (World Health Organization, 2016). Drugs may be legal (e.g. alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco) or illegal (e.g. cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine, and heroin) (Espejo, 2002). An illegal substance is any natural or artificially made chemical that is taken for pleasure, to improve someone's performance of an activity, or because a person cannot stop using it (Cambridge dictionary). These illegal substances can be divided into four main categories according to their major effects, while a few substances do not easily fit into any group. The

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main categories are; stimulants, depressants, opium-related pain killers, and hallucinogens (Mind for better mental health, 2016). Drug addiction is defined as a chronic, relapsing disease characterized by compulsive, difficult to control, drug craving, seeking, and use that persist even in the face of extremely negative consequences (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018). Different drugs affect the brain differently, but a common factor is that they all raise the level of the chemical dopamine in brain circuits that control reward and pleasure (De Silva & Fonseka, 2008) and leads to an inability to control the use of a legal or illegal drug or medication (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018). People use drugs for a few reasons: to feel good, to do better (sports, school or workplace), for curiosity, and for social pressure (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018).

Drug addiction is a major problem with increased crime, diseases, and poverty among addicts leading to social and family disruption (De Silva & Fonseka, 2008). According to the World Drug Report in 2017, 255 million people use drugs in the world. According to the National Dangerous Drugs Control Board (NDDCB) in Sri Lanka, the total number of drug-related arrests was 81,156 in 2017 and the prevalence of drug-related arrests was 506 per 100,000 population aged 15-64. According to the Annual Report of Colombo Crime Division, 1330 crime incidents were reported after illicit drug use. A minimum of 190,000 drug-related deaths occur in the world annually, mostly overdoses, and mostly opioid-related (World Drug Report 2017).

In general, the more risk factors a person has, the greater the chance that taking drugs will lead to drug use and addiction (Mind for better mental health, 2016). Risk factors may be either environmental or biological (De Silva & Fonseka, 2008). Some risk factors are; aggressive behaviors in childhood, lack of parental supervision, poor social skills, drug experimentation, availability of drugs at school, and community poverty (Zucker & Donovan, 2008).

### ***Relationship between Negative Childhood Experiences and Drug Addiction***

Child maltreatment is a risk factor for substance abuse in adulthood (Elwyn & Smith, 2013). Adverse childhood experience (ACE) score had a strong graded relationship to the risk of drug initiation from early adolescence into adulthood and to problems with drug use and drug addiction (Dube, Felitti, Dong, & Giles, 2003). Children who experience maltreatment are at well-documented risk for the development of problematic substance use and disorder (Cicchetti & Handly, 2018). Individuals who experienced maltreatment during childhood are at risk for an earlier initiation into drinking. Adverse childhood experiences are strongly related to ever drinking alcohol and to alcohol initiation in early and mid-adolescence, and the ACE score had a graded relationship to these alcohol use behaviors (Dube, et al., 2006). Indeed, childhood emotional maltreatment, physical maltreatment, and sexual abuse have each been associated with increased risk for tobacco use, alcohol use, illicit drug use, and polydrug use. Polydrug users had a greater prevalence of all types of maltreatment, although the most associated with this group were sexual abuse and emotional neglect (Alverse-Alonse, et al., 2016). Numerous forms of childhood adversity have been linked with risk for substance use later in development (Elliot, et al., 2014). Sri Lankan researchers talk about child abuse and drug addiction separately. This research seeks to bridge that gap.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study used a qualitative research design. Under the qualitative research design Multiple Case Study Method (direct observation and interaction with subjects) was used to collect data. Semi-Structured Interviews were used to find out adverse childhood experiences, drug

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addiction, and the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and drug addiction. The guide for the semi-structured interview mainly focused on identifying adverse childhood experiences and drug addiction of the prisoners. The interview questions covered the areas on demographic information, childhood experiences, family history, and their opinions about drug addiction & childhood experiences.

Twenty (20) participants who were addicted to drugs were initially selected for the study. Participants were prisoners of Welikada Prison who are addicted to heroin, Cannabis, hashish, or Cocaine and were recruited with the help of Jailers. Then a questionnaire was used to select six (n=6) participants who have encountered negative childhood experiences and seems willing to discuss them the best. All participants were male. Out of the six males, one is a Tamil, one is a Muslim and all others are Sinhalese. Participants who participated in the research participated voluntarily and were offered the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. The study followed APA guidelines for ethical research.

## **RESULTS**

Data were analyzed through the following 06 main themes: Negative physical experiences, Negative sexual experiences, Negative emotional experiences, Neglect, Family history, and Own ideas about negative childhood experiences.

### ***Negative Physical Experiences***

Physical abuse is intentionally causing physical harm to a child. Four out of six participants had negative physical experiences in their childhood. Following is an excerpt from one of the interviewees.

“... I lived with my mom’s younger sister after my mom left me. She always hit us. One day my aunt beat me because I fought with her son for an eraser. She locked me inside a room and she didn’t give me anything to eat that day ...”

### ***Negative Sexual Experiences***

Sexual abuse or negative sexual experience in childhood affects mental, sexual, and physical health. The purpose of this theme was to identify the participants' negative childhood sexual experiences. One out of six had a negative sexual experience.

“...The uncle in the house where my father boarded me died due to a heart attack. I was 15 or 16 years when the uncle died. A few days later the aunt came to sleep with me. After that, we had intercourse. They don’t have children. For about 2 years we lived together...”

### ***Negative Emotional Experiences***

Emotional abuse in children is defined as behaviors, speech, and actions of parents, caregivers, or other significant figures in a child's life that have a negative mental impact on the child. Emotional abuse occurs in all types of families. Having financial difficulties, being fearful of a parent, dealing with single parenthood, have experienced a divorce, struggling with substance abuse issues, talking badly to the child, and not touching or holding the child with affection impact the child. All the participants had negative emotional experiences in their childhood.

“... I have an elder sister and two brothers. My father worked far away from home. My mother discriminated against me from my childhood. She hit me if I am not taking care of my younger brothers. One day my mom hit me badly as I made them cry. She did not let me

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go to school after my father's death. Mom sent me to the market to work as a loader of goods. She only asked me for the money, but never asked about my condition..."

### ***Neglect***

Five out of six participants were neglected by their families. They all had broken families and unfortunately, they had a lower level of education because of their family background. "... Mother's younger sister who looked after us sold heroin. If we didn't take them to school and sell them, she didn't give us anything to eat. She blamed us with swear words. If mom didn't send money, she didn't give us medicine for our illnesses..."

### ***Family History***

Four out of six lived with drug-addicted parent and for three out of six participants, a member of the household has been in a prison due to drugs. "...From the time we know father took drugs and was regularly arrested. Father then went to jail every time. Hence we didn't have a house ..."

### ***Own Ideas about Negative Childhood Experiences***

Five out of six participants said that their childhood experiences led them to drug addiction and if that if they had a good family, they would not face these problems. "... If I had a good family, I wouldn't be like this. We have lost our lives since our childhood because of our parents. There was no one to look after me. Hence I got addicted to drugs..."

## **DISCUSSION**

This section explains the results obtained for each of the six main themes described above.

### ***Negative Physical Experience***

Child maltreatment is defined as all forms of physical, emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, and neglect or negligent treatment. In this study majority of the participants perceived that they have adverse childhood experiences. Children who experience maltreatment are at well-documented risk for the development of problematic substance use and disorder in adolescence and beyond (Cicchetti & Handly, 2018). When considering the results of the present study one out of six said that often his father punished him for little things and limited his freedom. Hence, he became addicted to drugs. Three others had broken families and also had negative physical experiences. When we look at the results, it is clear that negative physical experiences affect drug addiction in later life.

### ***Negative Sexual Experience***

An epidemiological study by Kilpatrick and colleagues (2000), using data from the national survey of adolescents, reported that a history of sexual assault increased the risk of having alcohol abuse or dependence. In this study, one out of six participants had a negative sexual experience. He said that it was a pleasure when he experienced it but that he became addicted to drugs while having sexual experiences with aunty.

### ***Negative Emotional Experience***

The emotional abuse of children may be the most damaging form of maltreatment affecting their emotional, physical, social & cognitive development. Physical and sexual abuse and neglect also affect the emotional well-being of a person. Childhood emotional abuse has been linked to problematic alcohol use in later life (Dube, et al., 2006). In this study, six out

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of six participants stated their negative emotional experiences very sadly. The results obtained confirm what other researchers have found about the link between emotional abuse and later drug use.

### ***Neglect***

Not all victims of child abuse and neglect will experience behavioral problems later on in life, but they are more likely to experience them. Pregnancy, grade repetition, delinquency, truancy, and substance abuse are very likely for over 50% of children who have suffered maltreatment (Butler, 2016). Victims of child abuse and neglect are driven to smoking, drinking, and experimenting with drugs during early adolescence. Male children with 6 or more adverse childhood experiences are over 4000% more likely to use intravenous drugs as adults (Butler, 2016). The findings of the present study where five out of six participants were neglected by their parents and later turned to substance abuse follow the pattern predicted by the results of the earlier studies.

### ***Family History***

Environment and genetics are two major factors that contribute to the issue of drug addiction. The environment a person grows up in affects their mental health, and scientists are beginning to understand the role of genetics in cognitive, behavioral, and substance use disorders throughout a person's life. According to the National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence, a person whose family has a history of substance abuse is twice as likely to develop mental health issues and substance abuse problems themselves (Laguna Treatment Hospital, 2019). Karunanayake (2000) and Karunanayake and Nauta (2004) state that family members can be identified as positive as well as negative role models of young people. One of the participants of the present research is a very good example of that. The participant said that he lived with his mother's younger sister and she is a heroin dealer. He thought it was the reason for his heroin addiction. Furthermore, a member of the household of three out of six participants' was imprisoned due to drugs while the participants were children. The research findings show that most of the participants have lived in a family environment that is prone to drugs.

### ***Own Ideas about Negative Childhood Experiences***

In this research, five out of six participants said that they faced problems later in life, especially their drug addiction because of their parents. Their broken families decreased their emotional well-being and their level of educational attainment. A majority of the participants perceived that their negative childhood experiences have led them to drug addiction. Furthermore, they said that not only they had broken families in childhood but also the pattern continued with their own marriages. They did not have the knowledge to live happily, became addicted to drugs and now they could not get away from drugs.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study found that adverse childhood experiences were reported by all the participants and that these experiences were described as being triggers for their addiction. It was also found that these adverse childhood experiences have negatively affected their family life, education, and future aspirations. Furthermore, the study helps us understand the weaknesses that we should change in drug-addicted people. Finally, we can use the findings of this study to help with prevention programs developed for children who are in drug rehabilitation centers.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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