

Research Paper

Psychological Well-being among Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is a pressing psycho-social concern that can negatively affect psychological well-being. The present review aims to examine studies that focus on the psychological well-being of adolescents and adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. The reviewed literature includes both quantitative and qualitative studies comparing individuals with a history of sexual abuse to those without such experiences. The findings consistently show that individuals who experienced childhood sexual abuse report lower levels of psychological well-being. Common difficulties include emotional distress, anxiety, depression, low self-acceptance, problems in relationships, and reduced sense of purpose in life. Several studies also indicate that the effects of childhood sexual abuse may continue into adulthood. In addition, findings also suggest that many survivors rely on personal coping strategies, especially when access to professional support is limited. Overall, the review highlights the long-lasting impact of childhood sexual abuse on psychological well-being and emphasizes the importance of early identification, psychological support, and preventive measures to reduce its negative effects.

Keywords: *Childhood sexual abuse, psychological well-being, adolescents and adults*

Childhood sexual abuse is a very severe issue that can have a wide range of physical as well as psychological impact on a person's life. It describes as any unwanted or inappropriate sexual behaviour that a young child or adolescent may experience during the childhood stage. Which can lead to an extremely disturbing and trauma causing experience for life also can lead to physical, emotional and mental suffering. This kind of experience during childhood can have an impact on a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour in later life and may suffer psychologically a lot as childhood is an important developmental stage. Survivors may suffer from depression, worry, fear, anger, lower self-acceptance, low self-esteem, and issues with trusting other people. Also, many struggle to build positive social and personal connections in life and may have feelings of insecurity or danger. The effects of sexual abuse can be long lasting may be seen during adolescence and adulthood. Every person can have a different impact of abuse depending on factors like family support, personal strength, and access to help. When people lack to find support and finds difficulty in asking for help can make their situation worse. So, it is really important to

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Received: March 19, 2026; Revision Received: March 22, 2026; Accepted: March 25, 2026

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study and understand how childhood sexual abuse affect in different accepts of life and helping survivors by creating better supportive devourment.

Psychological well-being is person's overall mental and emotional health; it has overall dimensions of overall emotional mental wellbeing.it is not just that you are free of mental illness but also the presence of positive feeling, being satisfied with your life, and having a sense of purpose. A person who has a good psychological well-being feels balanced in life, confident, can easily handle daily stress and also capable of bouncing back in life. They have feeling of Self-acceptance, maintain healthy interpersonal connections, decision-making autonomy, personal development, and life objectives, these are the well-known components of psychological well-being. When people really understand and accept themselves, build good relationships, and feel their life has meaning, their well-being gets a better. Being able to handle problems and tough situations also consider as a good mental wellbeing, everyone faces challenges, but people with strong psychological health are usually better at managing stress in a healthy way. Psychological well-being is important as it help people live happy, satisfying, and productive lives. That's why it's such an important part of overall health.

Childhood Sexual Abuse and Psychological Well-being

The psychological wellbeing of an individual can be significantly affected by childhood sexual abuse. It can disturb their emotional stability, make it through accept them and their situations, create problems in maintaining a healthy relationship, and the capacity to handle day-to-day challenges. Sexual abuse can disrupt a child's feeling of trust and safety, which can have an impact on their psychological and emotional wellbeing. Many people who were sexually abused as children also describe the feeling depressed, feeling ashamed, scared, and insecure. These emotions can slow down emotional growth and lower psychological wellbeing. Survivors struggle to continue a romantic relationship, trusting people, or struggles to feel satisfied with their lives. These challenges may become long lasting throughout adolescence and even into maturity.

Childhood sexual abuse can also make difficult for survivors to cope up with stress and tough situations. some develop coping skills and resilience with time but many continue to struggle with emotional distress if proper care and support is not given. Therefore, understanding the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and psychological well-being is important for providing early help, psychological support, and effective prevention strategies.

Childhood Sexual Abuse and Dimensions of Psychological Well-Being

Hasnain and Kumar (2006) investigated the psychological health of women who reported experiencing childhood sexual abuse. Initially, a biographical assessment intended to identify instances of childhood sexual abuse was used to evaluate 150 female students. Out of everyone, 93 reported as no history of sexual abuse, whereas 57 reported having an experience of childhood sexual abuse. Participants were divided into groups for severe and moderate abuse based on the type of abuse. A total of 60 adult women were included in the final study,20with the history of sever sexual abuse, 20 with moderate and 20 with no such experience. Verma & Verma's PGI Well-Being Scale was used to measure psychological well-being. The results showed that, in comparison to the participants who do not have such experience, participants who had experienced moderate or severe maltreatment reported lower psychological well-being. However, there was not very much difference between the groups with moderate and severe abuse, indicating that psychological impact does not totally

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depend upon the severity of abuse. The findings showed the correlation between lower psychological well-being and childhood sexual abuse. The study also highlights the long-term interpersonal issues that survivors face especially in their relationships, such as difficulties with intimacy, trouble in trusting others, and authority, which may impact them emotionally and their general life satisfaction. Although the fact that intensity does not directly affect well-being levels, there was a definite correlation between experiencing abuse and having worse psychological functioning.

Shree and Manjula (2017) explored psychological well-being among adolescents who had experienced childhood sexual abuse and those who had not experienced. The study included 91 college-going female adolescents. Among them, only 41 participants reported experiencing sexual abuse and 51 reported with no such experience. Psychological well-being was assessed using a standardized well-being scale with measuring multiple dimensions of functioning. The results showed the clear differences between two groups, participants who had not been sexually abused scored higher level of self-acceptance, positive interpersonal connections and life purpose. Survivors struggled more with accepting themselves and finding meaning in what happened. However, there were no direct difference in terms of personal development or autonomy. The findings showed that sexual abuse has an impact on important aspects of psychological health, including feeling of purpose and self-acceptance. Basically, the study points out how significantly sexual assault affects youth mental health.

Mullen et al. (2018) investigated the connection between women's adult mental health and childhood sexual abuse. The results showed that, in comparison to women with such experiences reported with high level of psychological distress, addicted to substance abuse and shows suicidal behaviour in comparison with those with no such experience. Severity of maltreatment also results in severe mental health. While survivors face challenges regarding their self-worth and purpose, it may affect key aspects of their well-being—like feeling good about who they are and having a sense of direction. Still, the study made it clear that not every survivor faces lasting problems.

The reviewed studies clearly indicate that childhood sexual abuse negatively affects important dimensions of psychological well-being such as self-acceptance and sense of purpose in life. Survivors show higher levels of mental health problems such as psychological distress, anxiety, and depression. Survivals also struggle with feelings of shame, guilt, and lower level of self-worth in terms of self-acceptance that results in difficulty to build positive attributes towards life. Additionally, purpose in life is also very disturbed, as survivors experience confusion, hopelessness, and struggles to find meaning and direction in life.

Gender-Based differences in Psychological Consequences of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Sigurdardottir et al. (2014) investigated the effects of childhood sexual abuse on health and psychological well-being with focus on gender differences. Total 14 adult survivors as 7 women and 7 men were interviewed twice for the study. The results showed that both male and female participants were suffering from severe physical and psychological issues that started in childhood. The abuse had a similar overall direct effect on wellbeing for both sexes, also differences in emotional expression were observed in both. The study highlights that however childhood sexual abuse has a significant effect on psychological health for both sexes, but the way they experience and express has a difference. the authors also

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highlight the need for long-term support networks and increased awareness among medical professionals.

Spataro et al. (2018) to investigate gender differences in mental health outcomes among those who survived childhood sexual abuse, using a prospective cohort design that included both male and female survivors. Sample of 1,612 participants from which 1,327 girls and 285 boys with the histories of sexual abuse had confirmed at the time of their medical examinations were included in the study. Data linkage was used to acquire mental health treatment histories, which were then compared to the general population. The results showed both male and female survivors had greater rates of mental treatment. Compared to female survivors, male survivors were far more likely to undergo psychiatric care. Survivors reported higher rates of severe affective disorders, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, and childhood mental problems, these results concluded that although childhood sexual abuse has a direct impact on mental health in both sexes but they also experience different levels and type of psychological consequences.

The reviewed studies show that childhood sexual abuse negatively affects psychological well-being in both males and females, but the impact may differ in expression and severity. Female survivors often experience internal distress such as anxiety, depression, and emotional withdrawal, which can affect their overall mental health and adjustment. In contrast, male survivors are more likely to externalize their distress and, in some cases, show higher rates of psychiatric treatment. Although, both the gender experience significant psychological difficulties, the pattern and expression of mental health problems vary. Understanding gender differences is important for providing equal and appropriate mental health support to survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Long-term consequences of Childhood Sexual Abuse

The long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse on mental health were examined by Ivanov, Platonova, and Kozlovskaya (2015). 68 children—22 boys and 46 girls—who were formally recognised as victims of sexual abuse were included in the study. While some children were abused within the family, others were abused outside of it. For five years, a group of 38 kids were monitored to see how their mental health evolved. Psychiatrists, neurologists, and psychologists evaluated the kids on a regular basis using psychological testing, observation, and interviews. According to the study, the consequences of sexual assault vary throughout time. Children displayed severe stress reactivity and symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the early stages. Emotional and behavioural issues persisted after a few months. More severe mental health problems developed over time, particularly in situations involving domestic abuse. Many kids displayed behavioural issues, poor moods, worry, anxieties, and emotional instability. Additionally, some acquired stress-related behaviours such as bedwetting, hair pulling, nail biting, and other habits. Some exhibited dangerous behaviours in later childhood, like running away, using drugs at a young age, and being confused about gender roles. Overall, the study shows that childhood sexual abuse can deeply affect a child's mental health, and these effects may continue for years. It also highlights that children who experience abuse within the family may face more severe psychological difficulties and need continuous psychological support.

Using a qualitative research approach, Manu Krishnan and Bhagabati (2024) investigated the effects of childhood sexual abuse on the psychological and mental health of adult women. The study sought to explore the long-term psychological effects of childhood sexual abuse and included adult women who reported such experiences. Anxiety, depression, self-

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esteem, interpersonal relationships, social functioning, and sexual adjustment were among the emotional and interpersonal outcomes that were the focus of the self-reports utilised to gather data. The study also looked at how stigma, modesty and concern about family affect disclosure and help-seeking behaviour. The results showed that severe psychological discomfort from abuse in childhood lead to low self-esteem, trouble in maintaining relationships, increase emotional problems, and decreased social functioning were reported in the participants. In order to address the psychological long-term impact of childhood sexual abuse, the study found that early experiences of sexual abuse might have long-lasting implications on mental health. Study also highlights the raising of awareness, offering psychological intervention, and focusing on prevention measures.

The reviewed studies showed that the impact begins from childhood with strong stress reactions and emotional disturbances later these problems may continue and can become more serious over time. Survivors may suffer from ongoing mental health issues like anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, behavioural difficulties, and challenges in relationships. It also highlights if a child gets abused within the family can lead to more severe and lasting psychological harm.

Coping and Resilience among Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Talwar et al. (2025) explored the experiences of adult female survivors of childhood sexual abuse in India in terms of psychosocial assistance and therapy. The main purpose of the study to explore how survivors of childhood sexual abuse deal with their emotional difficulties, challenges the faces and how rehabilitation paths they take to heal and build their resilience. The sample of ten educated adult female survivors were interviewed in a semi structured manner for the qualitative research design who had been sexually abused before turning eighteen Reflexive thematic analysis and narrative analysis were used to analyse the data in order to better understand what life feels like for the participants. The results showed that most survivors started their recovery by their own whenever the emotional pain hits them they tried to cope up with it in their own way some used to paint, write or some used to play with their pets. Before going for therapies and mental health experts some try to seek support from their friends and family. Some individual also tried to seek support from social media and religious aspects. They found ways to cope up with these problems and reached out for help when they needed it.

Leary (2009) studied that how men who have been sexually abused as child were coping with their emotional and behavioural challenges. The result showed when survivors find a way to heal by coping styles they focused on their personal growth and build resilience in their life but when some gave up suffered alone made thing worse the survivors struggled a lot but not everyone of them get success to bounce back in life Helping men build healthy coping habits makes a real difference in their resilience and mental health.

The study highlights that coping strategies play a very important role the way people cope up lead to way of recovery, by supporting and encouraging them. Childhood sexual abuse survivors face challenges but resilience is possible through supportive environment, self-reflection, and getting help from mental health services.

Research Gap

We really need more researches to better understand the impact of childhood sexual abuse on the overall psychological wellbeing and how coping strategies helps to recover in terms of gender differences and also in Indian context. As many studies shows how childhood

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sexual abuse negatively impact mental health, but only few studies focus on psychological well-being and also on accepts like self-acceptance over all mental health and a sense of purpose in life. There is also barely any research in the Indian context, which include both male and female survivors. Most of the researches are only about female survivors. There is still not much clarity about on how different coping strategies help survivors to improve their psychological wellbeing.

Critical Analysis of Literature

The reviewed studies shows that childhood sexual abuse has a very strong negative impact on psychological well-being, and age and gender doesn't matter. Survivors suffer from lower self-acceptance, reduced purpose in life, emotional distress, and difficulties in relationships. Both adolescents and adults who have experienced CSA show poorer mental health as compared to those without such experiences some studies shows that severity of abuse can lead to more problems but also some also points out that the abuse regardless of how severe it is already affect survivors' wellbeing.

There is also Gender-based research's which indicates that childhood sexual abuse affects both genders equally but women hold in their emotional pain, while men act it out or end up seeking psychiatric help. Studies also show that the impact of abuse can get more complicated, if the abuse happened within the family and can lead to long term consequences. But studies also shows that not all survivors experience the same and long-lasting effects. Survivors who avoid their feeling or pull away emotionally are linked to greater distress and those who finds social support and build their coping mechanism bounce back well.

CONCLUSION

The reviewed literature indicates that the childhood sexual abuse has a very negative impact on psychological well-being at different ages and genders. Survivors experience a lot of emotional pain from childhood to adulthood, lower self-worth and self-acceptance, difficulty in their interpersonal relationships, which ultimately lead to lower sense of purpose in life. But not everyone has a same amount of experience, some have faced a severe experience and some have moderate experience yet abuse itself has some kind of impact on psychological and mental health outcome. The studies also shows that Coping strategies, social support, and meaning-making can also plays an important role in improving psychological adjustment. Recovery is possible through these strategies but there is a need for greater awareness and support systems to promote long-term psychological well-being among survivors.

Implications

The findings of this review suggested that childhood sexual abuse has a great impact on the psychological wellbeing also for the long period of time from adolescence to adulthood so taking this in mind that childhood sexual abuse affects survivors deeply therefore mental health institutes and professional should also focus on helping survives to rebuild their self-worth and acceptance, feel confident to have a sense of purpose in life rather than only focusing on reducing the symptoms. Survivors should be encouraged to talk about feelings, reaching out for support, and finding positive meaning in life experiences. There is also a need to break the stigma around sexual abuse so that survivors feel safe to speak up and ask for help as Families, schools, and communities plays a big role in shaping survivors by working to create a supportive environment where survivors can feel understood and

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valued. In India also there is a big need for mental health support and awareness, survivors can recover strongly and psychological growth are possible.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Sandhya, & Prakash, S. (2026). Psychological Well-being among Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 14*(1), 074-080. DIP:18.01.507.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.507