

## Having suffered trauma during childhood triples the risk of suffering a serious mental disorder in adulthood



Suffering psychological trauma during childhood significantly increases the risk of developing a mental disorder in adulthood. Specifically, as much as three times, according to a recent study led by researchers at the Hospital del Mar Medical Research Institute, published in the journal *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience*. The study analyses the fourteen reviews and meta-analyses published to date in specialized journals on this issue, and is the first to take into account the full range of existing mental disorders.

In total, the studies analyzed incorporate more than 93,000 cases, revealing a direct link between suffering psychological trauma at a pediatric age and the risk of developing a mental pathology later in life. "It is the strongest evidence to date that psychological trauma really is a risk factor for suffering a mental disorder later on," says Dr. Benedikt Amann, lead author of the study, a researcher in the Mental Health Research Group at the IMIM-Hospital del Mar and the CIBER on Mental Health (CIBERSAM).

The most common childhood traumas are emotional, physical and sexual abuse, as well as emotional or physical neglect and bullying, although there are many others. Suffering one of these situations damages the brain, causing physical as well as psychological consequences in the form of various disorders. In the case of emotional abuse, the most frequent trauma is associated with the most prevalent disorder in the population, that of anxiety. But there is also a relationship between childhood trauma and other pathologies, such as psychosis, which is linked to all traumas, obsessive-compulsive disorder or bipolar disorder. The risk of suffering from borderline personality disorder increases up to fifteen times in the case of having experienced trauma during childhood.

Trauma in adulthood is also associated with a four-fold increase in the risk of a later mental disorder. The researchers point out, however, that there is less evidence for this type of pathology.

### Study the history of the sufferer

Given these results, Bridget Hogg, a researcher at the IMIM-Hospital del Mar, psychologist and first author of the study, believes that patients need an approach that not only takes into account physical factors, but also their history. In this sense, "It is necessary to guide the patient through their life history, to really review what has happened to them. Currently, we question what isn't working, but not what has happened in their life, because this requires opening up potentially painful subjects, and it is avoided." The study also highlights the fact that other traumas such as catastrophes, violent deaths or family abuse can affect people, generating structural and functional changes in the brain that open the door to future mental disorders.

In addition, for people with this type of pathology who have suffered previous traumas, the course of the disease is worse. For these reasons, Dr. Amann calls for action. "On the one hand, we must treat psychological trauma in our patients, but we also have to take action in the political and social spheres and invest more in prevention. For

example, by educating families and setting up programs to prevent bullying, which is a very important risk factor in terms of suffering a mental disorder, both for those who receive it and for those who perpetrate it," he stresses.

Materials provided by **IMIM (Hospital del Mar Medical Research)**

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## **How Anger Affects the Body**

If your chill was nowhere to be found this year, you're not alone. Public life and personal hardships provided ample fodder for flare-ups, which, in addition to costing your cool, can also take a more serious toll: According to scientists, prolonged and extreme anger can also exacerbate existing health problems, as well as affect the way we react to certain issues.

"Throughout the day and throughout the week and throughout the month, we're activating these systems during times of frustration, anger or rage that in the short run might help you in an emergency situation," said Dr. Ilan Shor Wittstein, a cardiologist at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. "But in the long run, it might be quite detrimental to how these neurohormonal systems are activated as often as they are for those cases."

Anger responses can cause a ripple effect throughout the body: From the cardiovascular system to your nervous system, it's all fair game. These are just some of the main organ systems it can play havoc with.

## **The Heart**

According to Dr. Wittstein, an expert in stress cardiomyopathy, also known as "broken heart syndrome," one way to think about the heart is to imagine a house: There can be issues with the pipes, doors or the electrical system, but the house itself might seem fine.

"Rage can have effects on the arteries that supply blood on the heart, it can have an effect on the electrical system specifically that tells the heart when to beat, and it can have an effect specifically on the heart muscle itself," he said.

So if you're already living with conditions that affect the cardiovascular system such as high blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythms or high cholesterol, moments of extreme anger may leave you more vulnerable to a sudden heart attack.

When you're filled with rage, Dr. Wittstein offered as an example, blood pressure can increase, blood vessels can constrict, inflammatory cells are released by the immune system. All of this can lead to the rupturing of plaque inside the coronary artery.

If that plaque forms a clot, blood supply in that portion of the heart can be cut off. "And that can either cause a heart attack that lands a person in the hospital, or a person can even drop dead of a sudden heart attack," he said.

## **The Brain**

In a sense, anger can have a positive physical effect in that it can help motivate you to get up and do something. When we're angry and aroused, our brains are primed for fast reactions. If there's danger or a social threat that triggers an angry state, we are more likely to act on it: the fight-or-flight response.

One possible trade-off: In that agitated state, we're less likely to make good judgments, to listen for certain information and to be attuned to other motivations that are important for humans like values, said Dr. Royce Lee, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral neuroscience at the University of Chicago.

"You might often hear a person in an angry state say or do something that they don't really like," Dr. Lee said. "And when they're not angry they will regret it and wish they didn't do that."

According to Dr. Orli Etingin, an internist at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell, anger and chronic stress also affects our memory, causing it to not “work very well.”

“Forget about the fact that you’re probably sleep deprived too,” she added, “but you definitely cannot pay good attention to things.”

## **The Gut**

You might have heard about the “gut-brain connection,” the much-discussed link between our emotions and our stomachs. Like other feelings, anger and rage can trigger gastrointestinal discomfort, malabsorption of food and loss of appetite.

“The GI tract is made up of muscle tissue and it’s innervated by nerves. So if you have a very high adrenaline output, the stomach and the intestines are going to have a hypermobility,” Dr. Etingin said. “You’re going to have cramps, you’re going to have diarrhea, because the muscles there are being over activated.”

According to Dr. William Burg, a clinical psychologist and professor at the Yale School of Medicine, small changes in your routine can help mitigate those risks. “It’s almost impossible to avoid feelings of anger, but meditation, breath work, fitness and getting a full night’s rest are all helpful ways to manage anger,” Dr. Burg said.

“If we all grew up understanding that, we probably wouldn’t be as stressed and angry as we are,” he said.

By **Gina Cherelus**