Sexual and physical abuse history and adult sexual risk behaviors: Relationships among women and potential mediators

Objective: While research has supported associations between experiencing abuse and engaging in risky sexual behaviors during adolescence, research regarding these associations among adult women is much more equivocal. In addition, few studies have attempted to identify potential pathways from abuse experiences to sexual risk behaviors. The current study examined the associations between a history of physical or sexual abuse and recent sexual risk behaviors among adult women. Additionally, this study evaluated binge drinking and depressive symptomatology as potential mediators of any relationships between abuse history and sexual risk behaviors.

Methods: A total of 1,428 women between 18 and 40 years of age attending family planning clinic appointments completed a self-report survey regarding their recent sexual behaviors and sexual and physical abuse history. Logistic regressions using backward elimination were conducted to identify factors associated with sexual risk behavior.

Results: A history of physical abuse by a romantic partner was associated with several sexual risk behaviors. Few significant associations between intrafamilial physical or sexual abuse and recent sexual risk behaviors were found. Additionally, there was no evidence that these relationships were mediated by binge drinking or depressive symptomatology.

Conclusions: Familial abuse experiences are not necessarily associated with recent sexual risk behaviors among adults. In contrast, physical abuse experiences, particularly those perpetrated by a romantic partner, are associated with engaging in adult sexual risk
behaviors among women. However, these associations are not mediated by alcohol use or depressive symptomatology.