

Childhood Trauma and Self-Harm: Cognitive and Personality Mediators

Saiesha Moparthy¹, Harun Afza², Patricia Nilsson², Malky Schwartz², Minaal Ali Khan³, Sarah Akhtar⁴, Sarah Keane², and Usha Barahmand^{2,5}

¹*The Gaudium School, Hyderabad, India*

²*Columbia University, New York, USA*

³*St. John's University, New York, USA*

⁴*Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, USA*

⁵*City University of New York, Queens College, New York, USA*

Abstract

Childhood trauma is a well-established risk factor for self-harming behavior, particularly in individuals with borderline personality disorder (BPD) features. However, the cognitive and personality-based mechanisms linking early trauma to self-injury remain underexplored.

Objective. This study examined two serial mediation pathways linking childhood trauma to self-harm: one via maladaptive schemas and BPD features, and the other via self-criticism and BPD features. The direct effect of childhood trauma on self-harm was also investigated.

Method. A cross-sectional sample of participants ($n = 247$) completed validated measures of childhood trauma, maladaptive schemas, self-criticism, BPD features, and self-harm. PROCESS Model 80 was used to assess direct and serial mediation effects. **Results.** Childhood trauma showed a significant direct effect on self-harm, indicating trauma contributes to self-injury beyond indirect mechanisms. Additionally, both serial mediation pathways were significant: childhood trauma predicted self-harm through maladaptive schemas and BPD features, and through self-criticism and BPD features. These findings support the role of cognitive-affective vulnerabilities in the development of self-harming behaviors. **Conclusions.** The results suggest that childhood trauma increases risk for self-harm both directly and indirectly via maladaptive cognitive and personality processes. Targeting maladaptive schemas, self-criticism, and BPD traits may be key in preventing self-injury among trauma-exposed individuals.

Keywords: childhood trauma, maladaptive schemas, self-criticism, borderline personality disorder, self-harm, mediation