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Childhood Trauma-Related Nightmares: The Relationship Between Exposure, Relaxation, and Rescripting Therapy and Cognitive Functions

Susan E. Ocean
University of Montana, Susan.Ocean@UMontana.edu

Marcus A. Ordane
University of Montana - Missoula, Ordane.Marcus@Umontana.edu

Cameo F. Stanick PhD
University of Montana, cameo.stanick@umontana.edu

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Trauma experiences are, unfortunately, a common part of childhood in the United States and are connected to serious health-related concerns throughout childhood and adulthood. A primary symptom of trauma exposure and posttraumatic stress is re-experiencing, which often occurs in the form of nightmares. Though cognitive behavioral treatment (CBT) is currently the most well supported treatment model for trauma-exposure, it does not specifically address nightmares. Left untreated, trauma-related nightmares may become chronic, impairing quality and quantity of sleep, and exacerbating and perpetuating trauma symptoms. Quality sleep is a necessary element of healthy child development. Trauma experiences and inadequate sleep have been shown to negatively impact children's cognitive functions, including memory, attention, and learning, as well as increase behavioral problems and decrease academic performance. While PTSD treatment does not typically alleviate nightmares, both Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT) and Exposure, Relaxation, and Rescripting Therapy (ERRT) have been shown to reduce nightmares, improve sleep quality, and relieve PTSD symptoms within adult samples. The proposed study found limited support that an ERRT adaptation for children aged 8- to 13-years-old (ERRT-C) was related to improvement in some cognitive functioning (e.g., attention, short-term memory, processing speed, reading achievement and comprehension).