

The International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD) would like to respond to the invitation to comment on the NIMH strategic plan. ISSTD is an international, non-profit, professional association that develops and promotes comprehensive, clinically effective and empirically based resources and responses to severe trauma and dissociation, and addresses their relevance to other mental disorders.

We respectfully request that NIMH consider the following information in further revisions of the strategic plan.

Substantive research has demonstrated that child maltreatment (including physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect) and other forms of interpersonal violence are disruptive to the normal course of development for the growing child and emerging adult, and play a significant role in the development of many of the major mental disorders. The dissociative disorders, in particular, are some of the most understudied yet highly morbid disorders directly related to child maltreatment. **Although strategic plans are necessarily broad and general, there are compelling reasons to include (1) the specific issue of child maltreatment and other forms of interpersonal violence, and (2) dissociation and dissociative disorders, as explicit targets for research funding.** These targets are essential to meeting stated objectives, including that of basing interventions on “robust risk factors to reduce and positively alter trajectories of illness” (Objective 2), given that child maltreatment is one of the most formidable risk factors for mental illness. We briefly delineate the facts to support inclusion of child maltreatment and dissociative disorders below, and have appended a list of supporting research:

- Child maltreatment results in complex and wide-ranging psychobiological problems, including pervasive effects on the structure and function of the brain. Specific research on the neurobiology of interpersonal violence and early disrupted attachment is paramount in meeting the goal of providing more accurate diagnoses and treatment to the mentally ill.
- Individuals who have experienced significant child maltreatment are not only at great risk for mental disorders, but also for chronic and serious physical disorders, and are at unusually high risk for many of the leading causes of death (cf., Adverse Childhood Experiences Study). Thus, the economic and public health impact of interpersonal violence, particularly child maltreatment, is enormous.
- A significant proportion of clinical populations report a history of child maltreatment. Typically, these individuals have high rates of comorbidity, such that the diagnosis of PTSD is entirely insufficient. There is urgent need for research that further delineates pathways by which interpersonal violence disrupts and alters neurobiology, resulting in multiple symptoms and disorders that are not sufficiently addressed by current diagnostic categories.
- Dissociative Disorders remain under-diagnosed and under-treated, even though prevalence rates in the general population are estimated as being commensurate with the rate of depression, and greater than the rate of schizophrenia. Severely dissociative patients remain in the mental health system an average of 6 – 8 years before they receive an accurate diagnosis and proper treatment.
- Dissociative disorders are among the most complex and highly comorbid diagnoses, yet there has been minimal federal funding for research in this area.

- Current neuroimaging studies indicate significant pathology in patients with dissociative disorders as compared to normal controls. There is urgent need for funding to compare dissociative disorder patients with other clinical populations.

The lack of attention to dissociative disorders confounds research, because the disorder has not been included in major prevalence studies, thus affecting data accuracy. Dissociative disorders include symptoms which have phenomenological overlaps with major symptoms of other disorders. For example, mental intrusions resembling passive influence symptoms of schizophrenia are highly prevalent in dissociative disorders. Thus there is an urgent need to conduct research to further delineate dissociative disorders, and to include them in major prevalence studies of mental illnesses.

Thank you for considering our input.

For further information, visit our website at [www.isst-d.org](http://www.isst-d.org) or contact Vedat Şar, MD, President of ISSTD, at [vsar@istanbul.edu.tr](mailto:vsar@istanbul.edu.tr)

Sincerely,

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