

Chronic Pain as Trauma: Thematic Analysis of Youth's Worst Migraine Experiences

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Introduction

Migraine/headache-related chronic pain impacts up to 26% of youth¹ and is highly comorbid with posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS)².

While PTSS can trigger and maintain chronic pain, less is understood about how pain may function as trauma in youth populations³.

What does this mean for youth with chronic pain who experience recurring severe pain episodes (migraines/headaches)?

Research Aim

Explore how youth experience and interpret their worst pain episodes as potentially traumatic events

Methods

Participants:

- 36 youth with chronic migraines/headaches (ages 10–18 yrs; M_{age} = 13 yrs; 30 girls, 6 boys)
- 2-3x weekly migraines/headaches
- 6/10 pain rating on average
- 50% reported clinically elevated PTSS

Data Collection and Analysis:

- Semi-structured dyadic interviews
- Reflexive thematic analysis
- Transcripts coded in NVivo to identify patterns in descriptions of a memorable past migraine

Results

① Bodily Overwhelm & Loss of Control

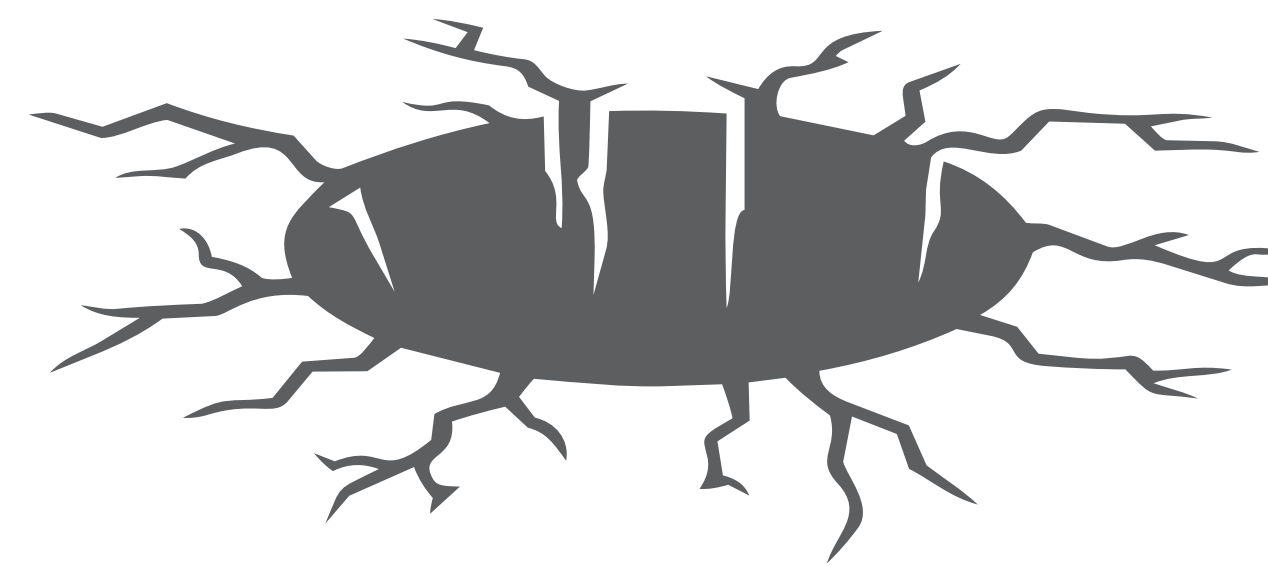
Physical shutdown leading to confusion and disorientation; body becomes unpredictable



“...confused me... I was just laying there and then got up and collapsed.”
“totally disoriented” “weird hallucinations”
“I tried to walk... I just kind of fell to the ground... [my legs] just kind of weren't there.”
“I thought [I was] lying in my bed... I opened my eyes... I was on the [kitchen] floor.”

Vivid Appraisals of Severity

Intense, emotionally-loaded language framing the experience as extreme



“hell” “brutal”
“the worst” “scary”
“awful” “terrible”

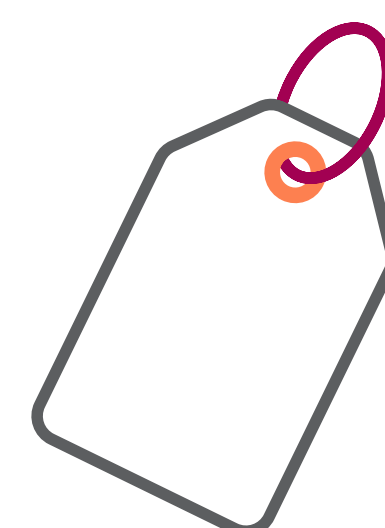


③ Feeling Isolated – Others Didn't Understand

Profound loneliness; a sense that others could not grasp the severity of their experience

“I was digging a trench to put up walls because I was so in pain... to get [away] from people... seclude myself and isolate.”
“I remember being mad at [them]... [for] making a joke out of it.”

Additionally... some families created labels for memorable episodes



Significance in collective family memory; retold as shared narrative anchors; emphasizes lasting impact
“The Sweet Potato Casserole Incident” “H. Park Headache”

Discussion

- Youth's worst migraine/headache experiences involve bodily unpredictability, isolation, and extreme severity appraisals that mirror trauma responses.
- These severe episodes create lasting impacts consolidated in family memory as significant events.
- Findings support conceptualizing recurrent severe pain episodes as potentially traumatic experiences for youth.



Let's connect!

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References:
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(2) Holley, A. L., Wilson, A. C., Noel, M., & Palermo, T. M. (2016). Post-traumatic stress symptoms in children and adolescents with chronic pain: A topical review of the literature and a proposed framework for future research. *European Journal of Pain*, 20(9), 1371-1383. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eip.879>
(3) Nelson, S. M., Cunningham, N. R., & Kashikar-Zuck, S. (2017). A conceptual framework for understanding the role of adverse childhood experiences in pediatric chronic pain. *The Clinical Journal of Pain*, 33(3), 264. <https://doi.org/10.1097/AJP.0000000000000397>