

Tonic immobility during rape

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Background

Active resistance is by many looked upon as the “normal reaction” during rape. However, studies have indicated that just as animals, humans exposed to extreme threat can react with a state of Tonic Immobility (TI) characterized by an involuntary, temporary state of motor inhibition, analgesia, decreased heart rate, and suppression of vocalization. The aim of the present study was to assess the prevalence of peritraumatic TI during rape and explore its association with PTSD development.

Methods

Tonic immobility was assessed in 298 women within one month of the assault using the Tonic Immobility Scale (TIS). Information about circumstances around the rape was taken from the clinics structured data files. After 6 months 189 completing women were followed up regarding the development of PTSD and depression.

Results

Results showed that 70% reported significant immobility during the assault. Prior trauma history and psychiatric treatment history was found being associated with the TI response and TI was associated with the development of PTSD.

Conclusions

In sum, the high prevalence and its association with PTSD development suggests that peritraumatic TI should be routinely assessed in sexual assault victims.