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Coping with Childhood Trauma from Past Abuse and Neglect

In this article, we'll be exploring the topic of past childhood trauma. While we always intend to be helpful when presenting information, we only encourage you to proceed if you recognize how this could affect you. Only you know best if it's something you want to continue with. Please remember that if you have experienced past childhood trauma personally, we want to encourage you to take breaks while reading, especially if you are feeling uncomfortable or strongly react to what we're sharing. We've included some resources near the end of the article that you may want to consult.

Many of us have experienced challenging moments in our lives. Memories of past childhood trauma may not be immediately obvious or apparent. They are often repressed in our minds or we may make a conscious effort to avoid thinking about these memories because they cause such a strong emotional response in us. While scientists are still researching and determining the complexity of connections between traumatic experiences and memories, "experts in child psychology argue that the memories formed from infancy to the age of 2 or 3 are very unlikely to be recovered."¹

We will look at how to recognize childhood trauma, find out how commonplace it is, and learn about some of the trauma people might have experienced that they have held on to and how it is affecting their adult lives. Then, we will talk about how repressed trauma may appear in adulthood and what our reactions to discovering it might involve. It's important to understand that trauma is unresolved stress and does not become your identity. With the right understanding, practical coping tools, and a framework resolution, you can move forward and heal from these events to live well and feel better.

What is childhood trauma?

Childhood trauma is stressful experiences, such as abuse, neglect and household dysfunction, that occur before age 18. Traumatic experiences usually involve situations where children feel threatened either physically, emotionally or both. Trauma is highly individualized because not everyone is affected by the same things or in the same ways. That makes it quite challenging to determine the exact causes. However, studies show that childhood trauma can affect a person's mental and physical health over time because our memories store both the events and the associated feelings/reactions.

What is a trigger for negative reactions?

When we don't have an immediate frame of reference for something, our brains (whose primary purpose is to help us survive) may turn to memories of traumatic events. It can create an unexpected reaction. What's happening is that we haven't found a way to process and let go of the associated trauma. Our bodies, in turn, respond in several different ways:

- nightmares
- flashbacks
- confusion
- sleep disorders
- anxiety and panic attacks
- depression
- grief
- guilt
- shame
- nervousness in everyday situations

Attempts to try to address the trauma may lead to behaviours that are associated with a range of mental health conditions that could include:

- substance use
- self-harm
- eating disorders
- personality
- mood disorders

How common is childhood trauma, and how often does it occur? Are certain groups or people affected more than others?

Dr. Gabor Maté is a physician who has studied trauma's connection to our health in a biopsychosocial context – how our health is affected by events we have experienced throughout our lives. He asserts that we need to acknowledge trauma because the interconnectivity between our psychology and physiology cannot be denied.²

Historically and currently, childhood abuse and neglect are often underreported for many different reasons ranging from children being generally unaware that what is happening to

them is wrong, to being afraid to tell someone they trust what is going on.³ In 2014, a General Social Survey conducted in Canada included questions about “maltreatment during childhood” for anyone over 15 to answer. It was ground-breaking because this study was the first-time data about childhood trauma and abuse had been collected nationally from adults. Here are some of the results:⁴

- a. Those between the ages of 35 and 64 years of age at the time of the survey were the most common segment reporting abuse.
 - b. 33% experienced physical or sexual abuse by someone over 18 or witnessed violence between known adults.
- More males (27%) than females (19%) experienced it and were almost twice as likely to report it. However, females were 3x more likely to have experienced sexual abuse before age 15.
 - 65% of abused people reported occurrences between 1 and 6 times; 20% reported being abused between 7 and 21 times; and 15% reported abuse of at least 22 times.
 - For 61% of respondents, parents and step-parents were responsible for the most severe physical abuse; but sexual abuse most often happened by someone outside of the family.
 - 67% of victims never told anyone about the abuse.
- c. 40% of Indigenous people have experienced abuse compared to 29% of non-indigenous, and 42% of indigenous women have, compared to 27% of non-indigenous women.
 - d. 48% of respondents who identified as members of the LGBTQ2 community reported having experienced abuse compared to 30% of heterosexuals.
 - e. Immigrants were less likely than non-immigrants to report a history of abuse as children. When abuse occurred, someone outside their family most often perpetrated it.
 - f. Drug and alcohol use were twice as common for people who had experienced childhood abuse.
 - g. There were negligible differences between people who had experienced childhood abuse when it came to education, employment, or income as adults.

Types of trauma

There are many different types of trauma that people have experienced.

Neglect

Neglect is where a child's or teen's needs are not attended to, exploited, pushed aside, or greatly resented. It can have immediate, short-term, and long-term consequences.

Neglect can be considered a general unawareness or systematic failure of a caregiver to respond to a child's needs because they were overwhelmed or preoccupied. It's often unintentional, perhaps reflecting low awareness and emotional intelligence or even a remnant of intergenerational trauma. In some instances, basic needs could be provided by caregivers, but it's the emotional and psychological needs that are not. Sometimes it's a case of caregivers "mishand[ling] one key area of support."⁵ For example, a child could be experiencing a lack of:

- comfort
- nourishment
- shelter
- medical care
- emotional support
- education
- caregiving (leaving a child alone or in the care of a third party who cannot provide adequate care)
- general resources such as food and clothing or even love when they are part of a large family

Neglect can be a "failure to act or notice a child's emotional needs," which results in chronic emotional and psychological crises that can affect brain development.⁶

From the caregiver's behaviour, a child learns that their needs are unimportant and that seeking adult support is often futile. In households with strict rules – such as no crying, no sadness, or no loud voices – the adults discourage natural, spontaneous responses from the child or teen. Instead, they should acknowledge that the child is likely instinctively expressing a need to feel close and share their emotions. By denying them the opportunity to process their feelings, these children grow up learning that mentioning these natural responses is something to fear. In the child's adult

relationships, this can manifest as mental and physical difficulties where they:

- feel low self-worth
- have low self-esteem
- display low confidence
- have trouble with loneliness
- are focused on perfectionism or avoidance, and
- find comfort in self-deprecation

Children also learn from caregiver behaviours such as being emotionally detached, anxious, or constantly worried.

Abuse

Abuse can be viewed as an intentional, conscious action or decision by a caregiver to deny a child care or harm them. In many circumstances, the abuse is physical or sexual. The abuse creates trauma.

Children who have experienced neglect and abuse are vulnerable to other traumatic events that are offshoots of the original trauma. It could be that they are threatened by, become involved in, or witness an event such as⁷:

- bullying
- community violence
- multiple complex traumatic events
- natural disasters
- early childhood trauma that occurs before age 6
- intimate partner violence
- traumatic medical stress
- refugee trauma
- traumatic grief such as the loss of a parent or close caregiver, or family member
- the end of a relationship (divorce)
- having a learning disability
- having a caregiver with untreated mental illness

Recognizing the signs of unresolved trauma

Symptoms of unresolved trauma start when adults experience stress or when experiences remind us about something that happened when we were children. Adults who have experienced childhood trauma aren't always able to recognize their own trauma because they have usually developed strong self-reliance and have often been the ones to build a solution to cope with these experiences independently.

As a result, it may be challenging to consider that symptoms of unresolved trauma may look like somewhat ordinary things. But these are often the body and mind's ways of alerting us to problems that originated in childhood:

- Chronic pain – migraines, joint and nerve pain, back pain, fibromyalgia, etc.
- Fatigue – constant low energy, weakness, brain fog, sleepiness, etc.
- Digestive issues – nausea, diarrhea, constipation, IBS, etc.
- Hypersensitivity/Hypervigilance – awareness of sensations to sounds, lights, environments, etc.
- Anxiousness – increased heart rate, panic disorders, fears, etc.
- Depression – low moods, lacking motivation, feeling hopeless, etc.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) is “used to describe all types of abuse, neglect, and other potentially traumatic experiences that occur to people under the age of 18 years.”⁸ ACE scoring is a methodology to help adults reflect on situations that may have affected their development. ACEs have the potential to uncover symptoms of childhood trauma because an adult can better articulate whether they feel they've been able to deal effectively with the ACE. In fact, “one in every six adults experience at least four ACEs, according to the CDC. These experiences can be particularly harmful because they occur at such a vulnerable phase of growth. In early childhood, brain development and social-emotional growth are at a critical stage.”⁹

How to recognize if childhood trauma is affecting you as an adult

It's important to realize that not all trauma is due to mistreatment or abuse. Children can experience frightening events in their lives, such as accidentally getting separated

from their caregiver in a store or being startled and uncomfortable because of loud noises in their environment. They can also experience trauma when they experience something new or, for the first time, like visiting a doctor or dentist. These events can create memories associated with trauma, but the cause was not neglect or abuse.

Some professionals help people sort through types of traumas by helping determine whether they have experienced what they are referring to as Big T Trauma or Little t Trauma, which attempts to explore them in the context of how the event affected someone's physical safety to produce the traumatic response. This approach can help someone determine if these experiences are affecting our innate sympathetic nervous reactions, also known as fight, flight and freeze.

Big T traumas are “generally related to a life-threatening event or situation...[like] a natural disaster, a violent crime, a school shooting, or a serious car accident,” but “chronic (ongoing) trauma, such as repeated abuse, can also qualify as big T trauma.”¹⁰

Little t traumas are “events that typically don't involve violence or disaster but do create significant distress... [such as] a breakup, death of a pet, losing a job, getting bullied, being rejected by a friend group.”¹¹

Common reactions to trauma

Framing childhood trauma may be difficult because we tend to discount the impact of events that happened to us in childhood. After all, they happened at a time in our lives when we didn't have the evaluative tools, control, and self-determination that adults do to process situations.

Our adult perspective and viewpoints can also cloud or invalidate the child's reaction to the trauma. For example, uncharacteristic responses from adult figures that may have been frightening to you as a child and perceived as threatening may not be viewed the same way today. There's also a tendency to internalize responsibility for the caregiver's actions, taking on blame for a situation and excusing the caregiver. It can be because, as a child, you were told you were responsible for that adult's behavioural choices at the time.

Many adults also experience disassociations where they strategically avoid certain situations. Generally, it's because they cause them discomfort as adults. An example of disassociation would be how as an adult, you can never be late, or it can cause you to panic. The root cause may be a childhood experience where a caregiver was late to pick you up. The emotions that the event made you feel may have influenced your development so that you unknowingly relive an unresolved traumatic experience from your childhood.

Ways to heal from childhood trauma

Now that we have looked at what trauma is, and unveiled how people may have experienced trauma, as well as abuse, it is time to look at ways which we can heal from childhood trauma. The following gives some strategies for healing.

- Learn to approach memories calmly and recognize and be curious about our automatic reactions. It is fundamental to learning about what triggers us, which can help process those triggers, removing their intensity over time.
- Try to fill in the blanks/gaps in memories by approaching them with storytelling. This method can help gently bring memories forward because it allows us to be more mindful as adults. We can leverage more emotional regulation tools that we have learned to understand these situations and process the experiences from a different perspective. It also helps us release the fearful associations and acknowledge how we can choose to remove the trauma, so it doesn't continue to have a hold on our current lives.
- Explore a wide range of treatment options:
 - CBT – cognitive behavioural therapy helps people re-think their thoughts and beliefs about traumatic events and activate healthy coping skills.
 - DBT – dialectical behavioural therapy helps to build skills in responding to stressors and emotional regulation.
 - EMDR – eye movement desensitization and reprocessing helps retrain areas of the brain that hold traumatic experiences by following a series of specific eye movements performed under the direction and guidance of an EMDR therapist.
 - Somatic Experiencing (or similar types of therapy) – create positive mind/body connections that help reset the nervous system. These could include treatments such as:
 - Deep breathing
 - Yoga

- Clinical EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique) focuses on stimulating acupressure points in the body with a repeated light touch.
- Clinical Myofascial Release focuses on specific guided motions to expand and contract tissues that relax and release tension and trauma.

Childhood trauma resources

You may want to review some of the most innovative thinking about childhood trauma from people who have extensively studied links between it and health as adults. They advocate for different approaches for physicians to acknowledge and address trauma's effects on our lives.

- Dr. Gabor Maté has written several books on the topic, including the recent release "The Return to Ourselves: Trauma, Healing and the Myth of Normal"
- Dr. Bessel van der Kolk created the National Child Traumatic Stress Network <https://www.nctsn.org> and has published a book about trauma titled "The Body Keeps the Score"
- Dr. Nadine Burke Harris gave a **TED talk**: "How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime," where she discussed studies prepared by the Centres for Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente. She has published a book titled, "The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity"

We have also included links to some Adverse Child Experience (ACE) Questionnaires that you may be able to explore as you begin working on healing from childhood trauma.

- ACE **Questionnaire** from The Canadian Association for Mental Health, CAMH.
- Finding your ACE score from the National Centre for Juvenile Justice, Family Violence and Domestic Relations, and Child Welfare and Juvenile Law **NCJFCJ**.

Above all, please be gentle with yourself as you explore your childhood trauma. It can be a difficult, lengthy, and complicated process to work through as an adult, and you may find that you are not ready to talk about it. Remember that you don't need to figure everything out alone. Taking time and space to heal is one of the most significant gifts you can give yourself.

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