

Understanding Trauma

Trauma is a psychological, emotional and physical response to a distressing event or experience. Any distressing event that leaves a person feeling overwhelmed and isolated may result in trauma. This can include events such as physical, sexual, emotional or psychological abuse, exposure to domestic and family violence or neglect. A dog-bite, illness, accidents, the death of a loved one and experiences of war may also contribute to trauma.

The distressing event may have happened once, or it can be something that occurs repeatedly. For many of the children you work with, it is not likely to be a one-off event. Understanding how trauma affects a child and how to help bring about healing and change, is an important part of your casework.

Some common reactions to trauma include feelings of losing control, betrayal, a sense of powerlessness, helplessness, shame, pain, confusion, an inability to control one's own mind and thoughts, heightened anxiety and an overall sense of loss.

Many parents and carers will also have their own experiences of trauma, either as children or adults. Understanding this will help you to better support them to care for a child in safe and nurturing ways.

Working in a Trauma –Informed Way

Trauma-informed care means you use your knowledge about trauma in all aspects of your work with children, parents and carers.

Working in a trauma-informed way means you understand the overall effect of trauma on a child or adult, and how it relates to development, daily functioning, wellbeing and relationships with others. You also know how to respond to trauma. At the same time, you are able to see beyond the trauma to the strengths, skills and hopes that each of the children, families and carers you work with has.

It is important not to make assumptions that a child or adult has 'trauma' or label them as 'traumatised' based on their exposure to distressing events. This is because trauma refers to an experience of an event rather than the event itself. Therefore, what one person experiences as traumatic, another may not.

You will need to talk to the children and adults you work with to understand how they responded to these distressing events. Look out for signs in their behaviour that indicate they have experienced trauma.

See [What is 'Trauma-Informed Casework'?](#) and [Understanding Resistance in Practice](#) for information on how you can work in a trauma informed way.

Snapshot of Different Types of Trauma

Common terms used to describe different types of trauma are explained below.

Name	Description
Acute Trauma	<p>Results from a single traumatic event, i.e. car accident, natural disaster or a single incident of sexual or physical assault.</p> <p>Occurs when a child or adult has an intense response or reaction to a single event. The impacts may be time limited or the effects may be lasting.</p>
Chronic Trauma	<p>Results from multiple traumatic events over time which are severe and persistent e.g., domestic violence or profound abuse or neglect.</p> <p>When multiple experiences of trauma happen, their effects are compounded. This is especially so when they happen close together or within the same context. As a result, the trauma a child or adult experiences is more complex than acute trauma.</p>
Developmental Trauma (also known as complex trauma)	<p>Results from chronic trauma that begins at a young age, i.e., chronic abuse, neglect or another harsh adversity in their care environment.</p> <p>Many children and young people you work with will have this type of trauma. It occurs at developmentally vulnerable times in the child's life, especially in early childhood or adolescence. As a result, their brain development can be significantly affected and it can have long lasting effects.</p>

Collective Trauma	<p>Results from a traumatic event that affects a whole group of people like a family, community or society, i.e., war, natural disaster, stolen generations or terrorist attack.</p> <p>It can alter the cultural fabric of a collective group and requires collective processing, recovery processes and grieving</p>
Intergenerational Trauma	<p>Occurs when trauma experienced by one generation is passed on to the next, i.e., genocide, slavery and forced removal of children.</p> <p>It can have a significant effect on parenting, behaviours, violence, substance use and mental health issues within families.</p>

It's important you check out the following fact sheets to get a better understanding of the different types of trauma, their effect on a child or adult, and how you should respond:

[*Impacts of Trauma*](#), [*Intergenerational Trauma*](#) and [*Collective Trauma*](#).

Signs of Trauma in Children

Be aware of how trauma can affect a child in terms of the following:

Thinking: they can find it more difficult to think clearly, concentrate and complete school work, as well as tasks at home, i.e. chores and homework.

Feelings: they may experience strong emotions including anger, fear, sadness, shame and guilt and have difficulty managing these emotions.

Physical: they may experience headaches, tummy upsets, problems with bladder and bowel control, nausea, fatigue nightmares and difficulty sleeping.

Worldview: they may believe that the world is not a safe place and develop a poor sense of self.

Relationships: they may experience trust issues, not want to be around others or get into fights.

Re-experiencing: they may experience survival responses that are immediate, extreme and out of their control, such as fight, flight and freeze.

For more information visit the Department of Communities and Justice [LINKS training and support](#) website for a range of factsheets on children and trauma, and other helpful tools. The resources are written for both caseworkers and carers.

Trauma can be Long Lasting and Increases a Child's Likelihood of Involvement with the Justice and Health Systems

The effect of traumatic stress for children can be long lasting and go beyond childhood. Research shows that childhood trauma can cause:

- learning difficulties including lower grades, suspensions and expulsions
- increased use of health services including mental health services
- increased involvement with child welfare and juvenile justice systems
- long-term health issues such as diabetes and heart disease. (SAMHSA, 2017).

Watch: learn more from Paediatrician Nadine Burke Harris as she explains '[How Childhood Trauma Affects Health across a Lifetime](#)' in this powerful 16-minute TED talk.

Recognising Trauma in Adults

Parenting challenges for adults with experiences of trauma may include:

- difficulty regulating emotions
- poor tolerance and frustration
- dissociation
- a lack of parental modelling and support
- experiencing the child as demanding and intrusive.

Adults affected by trauma may also display sleep problems, increased agitation, hypervigilance, isolation or withdrawal, and increased use of alcohol or other drugs. Older adults may exhibit increased withdrawal and isolation, reluctance to leave home, worsening of chronic illnesses, confusion, depression, and fear (DeWolfe & Nordboe, 2000).

Helping People Heal from Trauma

Learning about the experiences behind someone's trauma can be upsetting and overwhelming

You may find that you don't know where to begin when trying to build relationships and gain the trust of the children and adults you work with who have experienced trauma. Sometimes your involvement brings its own trauma to the families you work with. This can be hard to accept and can lead to your own feelings of hopelessness.

Watch this 5-minute video that describes the need to focus on building adult capabilities and strengthen the communities that contribute to children's learning, health, and behaviour.

Children and adults can heal from their experiences

While you cannot change what happened to them in the past, you can strive to see the person behind the 'traumatised' label and link them to those who can help them heal.

Look for and validate people's strengths and resilience and challenge the inequality and disadvantage that continues to oppress them. By working in this way, you have the opportunity to restore a person's dignity, contribute to their healing and sustain your own passion for the work you do.

Remember to listen and give the child or adult choices and some sense of control in their interactions with you. This will help them feel safer and effectively communicate their thoughts and feelings with you.

Watch the Resilience Series is a series of videos from the Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University

More Information

Please see: [*Trauma Behaviours, Medication and Mental Health Diagnosis*](#) and [*Trauma and Brain Development*](#) – factsheets coming soon.

References:

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