

Understanding Trauma

Event – Actual experience or threat of physical or psychological harm OR the withholding of material or relational resources crucial to health and development. Can be a single event or repeated events.

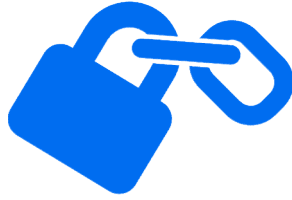
Experience – How someone assigns meaning to the event, which depends on the perception of the individual.

Effects – Results of the person's experience of the event. This can include neurological, physical, emotional, and cognitive effects.

+Working definition – SAMHSA, Trauma and Justice

Private Event Trauma

- Sexual, Physical Abuse
- Characterized by:
 - Secrecy
 - Power imbalance
 - Sense of hopelessness
 - Sense of isolation
 - Sense of irretrievable loss



Public Event Trauma



- Natural disasters, car accidents, war, crime victimization
- Characterized by
 - Shared experience
 - Lack of judgment
 - Sense of helplessness
 - Forces beyond control
 - Sense of irretrievable loss

Emotional and Physical Reaction

When we are faced with stressful situations, our mind and body automatically respond in one of three ways:

Fight
Flight
Freeze

Chronic Trauma

Multiple traumatic events happening to the same person

or

Multiple instances of the same traumatic event

or

Environmental or community trauma

Chronic Trauma has a cumulative effect-impacting the brain, body, and **all areas** of functioning.

Prevalence of Trauma

More than 50% of the general population have experienced at least **one traumatic event**; more than **25%** have experienced **two or more**.



What is the prevalence of trauma in your community?

Prevalence of Trauma

- As adults, children who were placed in **foster care** have **PTSD** rates **TWICE** as high as **US War Veterans**.

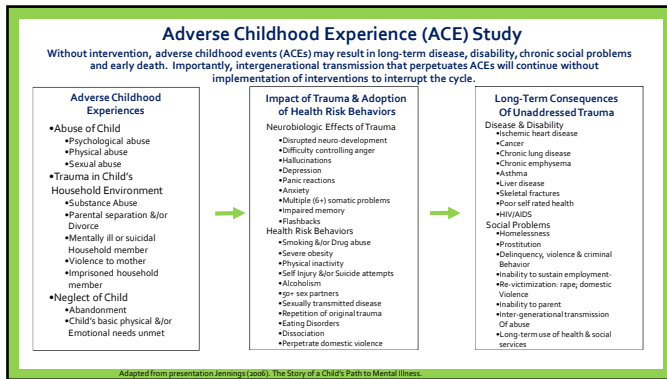
(Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study, Pecora, et al., 2005)

- Nearly 40%** of adolescents have directly witnessed an **act of violence**.

(Flannery, D., and Huff, C.R. Youth violence: Prevention, intervention, and social policy. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1998)

- Despite the importance of epidemiologic information, obtaining precise estimates of the prevalence and incidence of different types of potentially traumatic events that can occur in childhood is actually problematic.

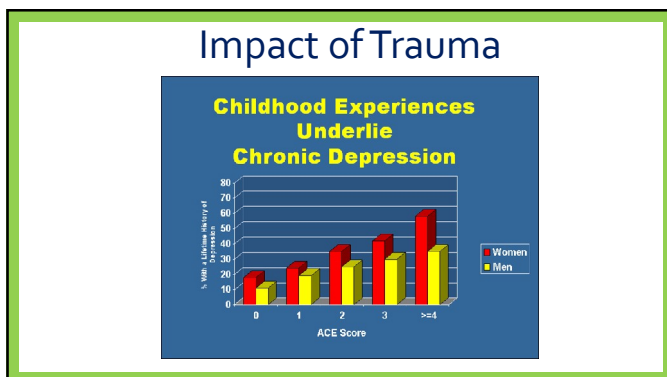
(Saunders, B. E., & Adams, Z. W. (2014). Epidemiology of Traumatic Experiences in Childhood. Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 23(3), 369-384.)



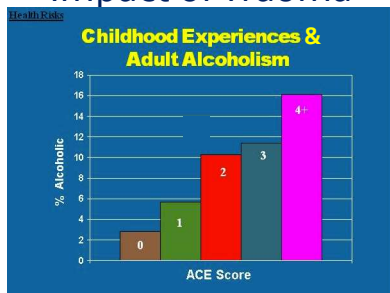
Impact of Trauma

First published in 1998, the Adverse Childhood Experience Study showed that:

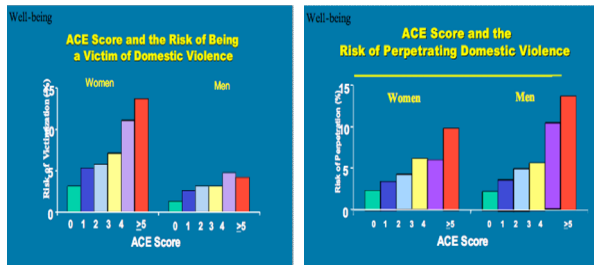
- 1) Traumatic experiences are **vastly more common** than recognized or acknowledged
- 2) There is a **powerful relationship** between emotional experiences as children and physical and mental health as adults
- 3) Traumatic events during childhood can be converted into **chronic disease** as adults
- 4) Adverse events and stress can lead to chronic diseases, such as **diabetes**, **heart disease** and some types of **cancer**, as well as **depression**, **alcoholism** and **drug abuse**



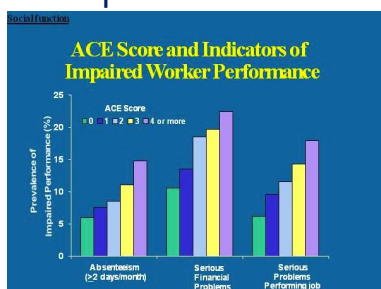
Impact of Trauma



Impact of Trauma



Impact of Trauma

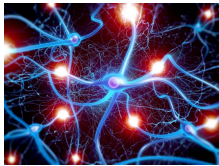


Brain Development

- At birth, the brain is about **25%** the size of the adult brain in weight and volume (less than 1lb), but contains nearly the same number of brain cells or neurons (100 billion).
- The brain stem and lower brain are well developed, but the higher regions are less developed.

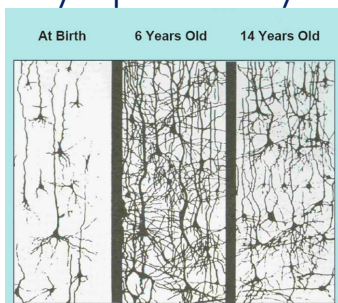


Brain Development



- As a child ages, the same number of neurons are in place, but the number of synaptic connections drastically increases until adolescence
- During adolescence, the unused connections are pruned and the more frequently used connections are strengthened.

Synaptic Density



Impact of Trauma on the Brain

Trauma can impact the developing brain by...

- Reducing the number of **connections** formed
- Reducing the **size of the cortex**
- Strengthening **survival** connections

Resulting in...

- Memory problems
- Attention difficulty
- Language development delays
- Emotional and behavioral regulation issues

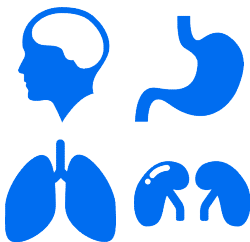


Impact of Trauma on the Brain

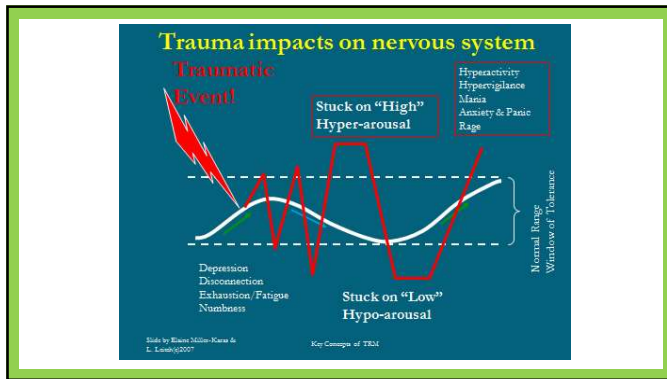
- When the **stress response** is activated, the release of **cortisol** can lead to the creation of **flashbulb memories** of events associated with **intense emotional reactions**, both positive and negative.
- These memories can be especially vivid-resulting in not just **visual recall** but **physical responses** as well.



Impact on the Body



If an individual's body is responding to **acute stress** for a prolonged period, whether a child or adult, the **increased adrenaline** and other hormones can cause **increased blood sugars**, heart rates and changes in blood flow along with other often **harmful biological responses**.



Trauma and Development

- How trauma is experienced is dependent on both **developmental** and **life stages**.
- Change**, whether between major stages of **development** or within someone's life **circumstances**, can often result in the re-emergence of symptoms.
- Symptomology is not bound by stages- **all symptoms can be experienced throughout the lifespan**.



Trauma and Early Childhood

- The trauma of not having a **healthy relationship** with a **primary caregiver** can result in difficulty in:
 - Regulating** emotions
 - Trusting** others
 - Feeling** free to explore environments
 - Developing** sense of self
- High risk due to rapid development
- Less able to anticipate danger
- Cannot always express feelings in words

Trauma and Early Childhood

- Children often do not understand **cause and effect**, which can result in **blaming** themselves or caregivers
- Children have a profound **lack of control** over their environments
- Children are often going through trauma alongside their primary caregiver
- Parent/child shared trauma impacts ability to parent
- May blame parents/caregivers for not preventing stress and trauma

Impact of Trauma on Young Children

Trauma can result in:

- Delayed development of **verbal skills**
- **Memory** problems
- Regressive behaviors
- **Aggression**
- Excessive crying or screaming
- Problems with **focus/learning**
- Poor appetite, low weight, digestive problems
- **Irritability**, sadness, and anxiety
- Nightmares/sleep difficulties
- Compulsion to re-enact or **imitate traumatic event**
- Exaggerated startle response
- Difficulty **trusting** others
- Lack of self confidence
- **Somatic** complaints
- Bed wetting

Impact of Trauma on Adolescents

Trauma can result in:

- **Anxiety, fear, and worry** about safety of self and others
- Sudden changes in behavior
- Difficulty **trusting** others
- Repetitive thoughts and comments about **death or dying** (including suicidal thoughts, writing, art, or notebook covers about violent or morbid topics, internet searches)
- Heightened **difficulty with authority**, redirection, or criticism
- Re-experiencing the trauma through nightmares or disturbing memories
- **Sleep** difficulties
- Exaggerated startle response
- **Avoidance behaviors**
- Emotional numbing

Impact of Trauma on Adults

Adults may experience the impact of compounded, unaddressed childhood trauma, but also experience new traumatic experiences throughout the life span. Resulting symptoms include:

- Depression
- Lack of **trust**, particularly of authority
- Impaired social/sexual relationships
- **Hypervigilance**
- Inertia
- **Substance abuse**/self-medicating
- Mental illness
- Emotional **dysregulation**

Diagnosis



- **Trauma** is most commonly associated with **PTSD**.
- In many cases, only **obvious symptoms** are addressed: substance use disorder, agoraphobia, anxiety disorder, major depression, OCD, eating disorder, personality disorder, behavioral/impulse control concerns, without addressing **trauma and toxic stress as underlying causes**.
- **Trauma** can be thought of as a **co-occurring disorder** with mental illness.

Intervention

- Many effective **therapeutic interventions** are available for individuals of **all ages** through various individual or group modalities.
- **Interventions** available that cater to one's individual **strengths** (visual, verbal, experiential, artistic, etc...).
- **Trauma is not "cured"** – therapeutic intervention is unable to erase the traumatic event(s) and individuals may require **additional intervention** at various points throughout the **lifespan**.

Responding to People with Trauma

- We must:
- Acknowledge that we may unintentionally trigger someone's trauma response.
- Work to see an individual's responses and behaviors as the result of changes in the brain and body.
- Strive to see the world through the lens of trauma.

Changing the Question

To become alive and well, we need to change the question from...

What's wrong with you?
to

What happened to you?

Becoming a Trauma-Informed Organization

A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed:

1. Realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery;
2. Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff and others involved with the system;
3. Responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures and practices;
4. And seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.

-Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Six Principles

- Safety
- Trustworthiness
- Choice
- Collaboration
- Empowerment
- Cultural Sensitivity

Learn More

- www.aliveandwellstl.com
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network <http://www.nctsn.org>
- www.aacap.org/clinical/ptsdsum.htm
(American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry)
- <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/ptsdmenu.cfm>
(National Institute of Mental Health)
- http://www.massadvocates.org/HTCL_g-09.pdf
- <http://www.k12.wa.us/CompassionateSchools/pubdocs/TheHeartofLearningandTeaching.pdf>
- www.annainstitute.org