

Complex Trauma and Children

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Being traumatised means continuing to organise your life as if the trauma were still going on – unchanged and immutable – as every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past.”

van der Kolk, 2014:53

4 Really Important Things To Know About Trauma!

Understanding trauma is more complex than we might at first think. There are 4 important issues to consider in developing a more detailed understanding.

1. Trauma involves an objective event and a subjective meaning

- + The term trauma means something in particular and is not interchangeable with the term stress!
- + A definition of trauma:
 - + *Trauma is considered to be any event that causes an individual to feel psychologically overwhelmed and in this sense the person's capacity to cope is impaired and the possibilities for integrating the experience of the trauma into their lives are reduced.*
- + In order for something to become a trauma there must be two things going on – an actual event which is considered traumatic and a subjective meaning made of that event.

Traumatic Events

- + War and civil conflict
- + Torture
- + Terrorist attacks
- + Motor vehicle accidents
- + Death of loved ones
- + Childhood abuse (emotional, physical, sexual)
- + Neglect, abandonment in childhood
- + Adult sexual assault
- + Adult physical assault
- + Witnessing violence
- + Serious injury or illness
- + Invasive medical procedures including periods of hospitalisation
- + Birth stress

Meaning Making

- + The meaning that a person makes of an event will determine a great deal about the impact it will have.
- + Traumatic events impact differently on different people depending on the meaning that they made.
- + Meanings we make as adults are often related to meanings we made as children that we still carry with us now, especially if there has been trauma in a person's childhood.
- + For this reason, those of us who work with adults need to have a well developed understanding of what happens to us in childhood when we experience trauma.

Child Development – Sense of Self

- + One of the biggest impacts of trauma on a child is their developing sense of self. This results in a feeling that there is something wrong with us (that we can rarely specify or articulate clearly).
- + Without a positive experience of dependency as a child it is not possible to experience independence as an adult (Winnicott and Docker-Drysdale).
- + If our developmental needs are not met in childhood there is a sense of remaining stuck there as we try to find alternate ways to meet these needs – needs that are essential for the development of a healthy and independent sense of self.
- + Childhood trauma is a substantial obstacle to the development of a positive sense of self.

Child Development – 3 quick points!

- + 1. Dependency and differentiation
- + 2. Attachment
- + 3. Meaning making

Traumatic Events for Children

- + All forms of abuse and neglect
- + Domestic violence
- + School violence
- + Robbery and related events
- + Kidnapping
- + Violence in their community
- + Medical trauma
- + Motor vehicle accidents
- + Acts of terrorism
- + War
- + Natural and human made disasters
- + Suicides
- + Other traumatic losses

(APA 2008 Presidential Taskforce in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Trauma in Children and Adolescents.)

Trauma and Meaning Making

- + Experiencing a traumatic event does not necessarily mean that a person (or a child) will be traumatised by it.
- + The subjective aspects of a trauma (the meaning made of the traumatic event) will determine, to a large degree, whether or not the person / child finds the event traumatic and the impact the trauma will have both at the time and later in life.

2. Single Incident and Complex Trauma

- + Single incident trauma - PTSD
- + If a child has strong caregiving relationships with parents who are emotionally attuned to the child, the impact of the trauma will be considerably lessened.
- + "During disasters young children usually take their cues from their parents. As long as their caregivers remain calm and responsive to their needs, they often survive terrible incidences without serious psychological scars." (van der Kolk, 2014:52)

Complex Trauma

- + Complex trauma refers to multiple traumas that are usually relational and that form a cumulative effect escalating the impact of the traumas.
- + It is most commonly applied to persistent childhood abuse and neglect.
- + It is also a relevant term for adults who have experienced multiple traumas, especially interpersonal ones – domestic violence, hostages, etc.

Developmental Trauma Disorder

- + Developmental Trauma Disorder is the term applied specifically to complex trauma in childhood and most commonly to "children who have developed in the context of ongoing danger, maltreatment, and inadequate caregiving systems". (van der Kolk, 2014: 359)

The Quality of Caregiver Relationships

- + The quality of the child's relationship with the primary caregivers plays a highly significant role in determining the extent of impact of a trauma.
- + Poor attachment can itself be a source of trauma for a child but it can certainly make any experience of trauma more difficult for a child to deal with and heal from.

Caregiver Relationships

- + NYU Dept of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry study into PTSD predictions for children in burns units based on feelings of safety with primary caregivers.
- + "The security of their attachment to their mothers predicted the amount of morphine that was required to control their pain – the more secure the attachment, the less painkiller was needed." (van der Kolk, 2014:119)

Disorganised Attachment

- + Organised attachments - secure, avoidant, anxious / ambivalent. There is some degree of predictability for the child and a sense that the parent is doing the best they can given their capacities.
- + Disorganised attachment – the caregiver is a source of distress or terror to the child. There is a severe contradiction for the child in that the parent ensures survival but also threatens it.
- + Research from long-term follow up studies with adults suggest that disorganised attachment severely impacts on sense of self, capacity for self-regulation, anger, suicidal ideation, physical health issues.

3. Trauma can be environmental or preventable

- + Environmental traumas are those that are largely unavoidable and can be seen as a part of life for us all.
- + They include natural disasters, accidents, death of loved ones etc.
- + Preventable traumas are often relational and include all forms of abuse, violence and misuse of power.
- + It is harder to integrate a trauma if there has been a misuse of power and especially if the trauma is relational.
- + The majority of childhood traumas are preventable.

Preventing Traumas

- + While we are moving towards a greater appreciation of the incidence and impacts of trauma, there is no room for complacency.
- + Freud had the same idea in 1892 in his publication 'The Aetiology of Hysteria'.
- + Bowlby tried again in 1940s.
 - + "By the late 1940s Bowlby had become *persona non grata* in the British psychoanalytic community, as a result of his radical claim that children's disturbed behaviour was a response to actual life experiences – to neglect, brutality, and separation – rather than the product of infantile sexual fantasies." (van der Kolk, 2014:110)

Preventing Trauma.

- + And then in 1974 we reached a real low point with one of the most commonly used psychiatric text books – Freedman's Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry stating:
 - + "... incest is extremely rare, and does not occur in more than 1 out of 1.1 million people. Such incestuous activity diminishes the subject's chance of psychosis and allows for a better adjustment to the external world... The vast majority of them were none the worse for the experience." (van der Kolk, 2014:188-9)

The Cost of Trauma

- + ASCA has released a report on the cost of unresolved childhood trauma and abuse in adults in Australia.
- + Childhood trauma, including abuse, affects an estimated 5 million Australian adults.
- + Pegasus Economics estimates that if the impacts of abuse on 3.7 million adults were addressed it would save minimum of \$6.8 billion annually.
- + Pegasus Economics estimates that the annual budgetary cost of unresolved childhood trauma is \$24 billion.

4. Trauma experiences cannot be universalised

- + There are wide ranging individual differences in how people respond to traumatic events.
- + Understandings of trauma should focus on the meaning the individual has made of the trauma.
- + All trauma work should occur in a cultural context in recognition of the cultural differences relating to the nature of trauma and trauma response.

Signs of Exposure to Childhood Trauma

Something Will Happen!

Signs of Childhood Trauma

- + There are many factors that will influence how a child will respond to a traumatic event. Most importantly is the age and developmental stage of the child.
- + The younger the child, the more likely they will be overwhelmed by a traumatic experience.
- + There will always be some sign, some way that children try to communicate with us as adults.
- + Given that children have limited capacities and high levels of dependency, it is critically important that we read the signs and pick up the signals that children may be displaying.

Signs of Childhood Trauma

- + The universal symptoms of exposure to trauma include:
 - + Hyperarousal
 - + Constriction
 - + Dissociation
 - + Hypoarousal
- + These reactions are 'normal' reactions to trauma. What is not normal is for these reactions to continue and our bodies to not return to a normal rhythm when the threat is over.

+ Levine 2007

Signs of Childhood Trauma

- + APA Study found that the most observable behaviours in children who have experienced trauma are:
 - + Development of new fears
 - + Separation anxiety especially in young children
 - + Sleep disturbances, nightmares
 - + Sadness
 - + Loss of interest in normal activities
 - + Reduced concentration

Signs of Childhood Trauma

- + Decline in schoolwork
- + Anger
- + Somatic complaints
- + Irritability
- + The child's reaction may look either like 'acting out' behaviours or 'acting in' behaviours.

Signs of Childhood Trauma

- + Many researchers in this area strongly suggest that exposure to threats of violence that are chronic and that occur early in life, lead to life long learning and behavioural problems, often with diagnoses / misdiagnoses of:
 - + Anxiety disorders
 - + ADD and ADHD
 - + Depression
 - + Predispositions to impulsive and violent behaviours
 - + Other mental health issues.

Neurobiology of Childhood Trauma

- + The impact of trauma on the developing brain is a critically important area and we have many more insights into this now.
- + We are now more aware of the impacts of trauma on the developing brain of a child and about what interventions might be effective.
- + There 3 primary points that are very relevant to trauma work:

Neurobiology

- + 1. Bruce Perry- the use-dependent nature of the brain.
- + The brain develops in a use dependent way. If we use a part of our brain it will develop, and often at the expense of other parts of the brain that also require energy and stimulation to develop.
- + If all our energy is locked in our instinctual / survival brain then other important brain functions will struggle to develop.
- + The brain develops and changes with patterned, repetitive activity.
- + "So the systems in your brain that get repeatedly activated will change and the systems in your brain that don't get activated wont change." (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006:29)

Neurobiology

- + "... the growing brain organises itself to be more reactive to survival functioning at the expense of development in the limbic and cortical areas responsible for the modulation of impulse and emotion. The infant brain becomes hyper-alert to the perceived danger. In other words, the brain becomes programmed in such a way that feelings of terror and helplessness become a 'normal' state of being." (Levine, 2007:34)

Neurobiology

- + 2. Bonnie Badenock – neural nets.
- + Hebb's axiom - what fires together, wires together.
- + All aspects of an experience gather into a neural net that encodes a representation of that event – when triggered, the whole net is commonly activated and we remember.
- + Dan Siegel notes that 'every act of recall is also potentially an act of modification'. This is one way that our relationship may positively alter our clients' painful and overwhelming memories.

Neurobiology

- + 3. van der Kolk - the medial prefrontal cortex.
- + It has now been shown (by Joseph LeDoux) that the only way we can consciously access the emotional brain is through the medial prefrontal cortex.
- + "The rational, analysing part of the brain, centred on the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, has no direct connections with the emotional brain, where most imprints of trauma reside, but the medial prefrontal cortex, the centre of self-awareness, does." (van der Kolk, 2014:206)
- + Neuroscience research shows that the only way we can change the way we feel is by becoming aware of our inner experience and learning to befriend what is going on inside ourselves." (van der Kolk, 2014:206)

Healing Childhood Trauma

We can do more than we realise to create the conditions for healing – for children and adults.

What is Healing – for adults?

- + Doing for ourselves now, what we so desperately needed back when we were children but did not get.
- + As adults we can take responsibility for healing ourselves by giving ourselves the things we missed out on.
- + No one else (not even our parents) can do it for us now.
- + And if we don't deal with it, these issues and this pain will simply not go away but will stay inside us impacting on our lives in increasingly complex ways.
- + People can do terrible things with their pain.

Healing for Adults

- + There are a few important things that we need to bring to our adult healing:
 - + Compassion
 - + Non-judgment
 - + Putting our own oxygen mask on first!
 - + Updating our truth
- + Healing from trauma is an ongoing process

What is Healing – for children?

- + Returning to meaning making... we can provide a contradiction to the (default) meaning the child has made of their trauma.
- + Safety is paramount – everything else is a bonus.
- + Emotions - safe expression to complete the cycle of the emotion.
- + Bodies – discharging excess energy.
- + Power – let the child be in control of their expression as much as possible.

What can we do?

- + We can bring our 'therapeutic' selves to every interaction.
 - + Our therapeutic understanding
 - + Our therapeutic intention
 - + Our therapeutic actions
- + Really see the adult / child – we all have a natural healing process and we can help to encourage and restore that in everyone.
- + We can only do what we can do – but we can do it really well!
- + Make the most of every opportunity, even if it is only brief.

Healing Childhood Trauma

- + "Just like the splint sets the broken arm properly, your undivided attention and soothing, non-judgemental language set the conditions for the child, in his or her own time, to rebound to a healthy sense of well-being." (Levine & Kline, 2007:96)

What About Us!

- + We need to be feeling stable and in control so that we can be a solid and responsible adult in an adult or child's life.
- + We need to do our own work (on ourselves).
- + To do trauma work takes a great deal of us and we need to ensure that we have:
 - + Good self care
 - + Purposeful and reflective practice
 - + Good boundaries
 - + Lots of beautiful things in our lives



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Thanks for listening!
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