NACCOM's Hosting Good Practice Guide: Part 2

Appendix 7

Understanding Trauma

Most of our guests will have experienced trauma at some point in their lives. It is important to be aware of how trauma may affect them and therefore any behaviours that might relate to this.

The Effects of Trauma On The Brain

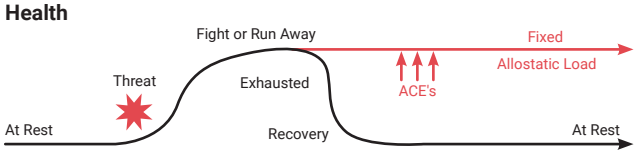
The brain's normal response to danger is that the amygdala releases a surge of stress hormones (adrenaline, norepinephrine etc.), a survival mechanism, sending someone into a fight or flight response. When the danger has passed the body is exhausted and it takes time to recover and return to a place of rest. This is designed to be a short-term reaction.

When someone suffers trauma, the brain experiences the same surge of stress hormones, inducing fight or flight.

A trauma is an event or experience that is deeply distressing to someone:

> *"A response to discrete or prolonged circumstances which at some point is perceived by the person to be an uncontrollable serious threat to physical or psychological integrity and which some point overwhelms emotional resources"*
> ***- Trauma Informed Working training, Wigglesworth and Hanson***

Ongoing trauma and ongoing trauma experienced in childhood, or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) causes the brain and body to remain in a heightened state of tension, this leads to physical and mental 'wear and tear' on the body (allostatic load).



The infographic below explains what might happen in someone suffering inescapable trauma.

In children, ongoing ACEs, also reduce neural connections in the thinking brain, limiting cognitive ability. Remaining pathways to the thinking part of the brain are weakened and the pathways to the survival part of the brain strengthened, which effects their ability to cope with adversity as adults.

The Effects of Trauma

The main effects of trauma can be described under four headings: psychological, physical, emotional, and behavioural, though they will be interconnected.

Psychological

Those who have experienced repeated trauma will usually also struggle with their mental health; anxiety, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Complex PTSD (CPTSD) are frequent.

PTSD is an anxiety disorder where someone relives the traumatic experience/s through nightmares and flashbacks. This could occur immediately after a traumatic experience or weeks, months or years later. They may also experience the symptoms below:

- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Repetitive distressing images
- Physical sensations (pain, sweating, feeling sick)
- Feelings of isolation
- Irritability
- Feelings of guilt
- Avoidance of things that trigger flashbacks
- Hyperarousal (constantly aware of threats)
- Insomnia
- Difficult to concentrate
- Trying not to feel at all

CPTSD can occur in someone who has experienced reoccurring trauma, such as violence, neglect, abuse or modern slavery.

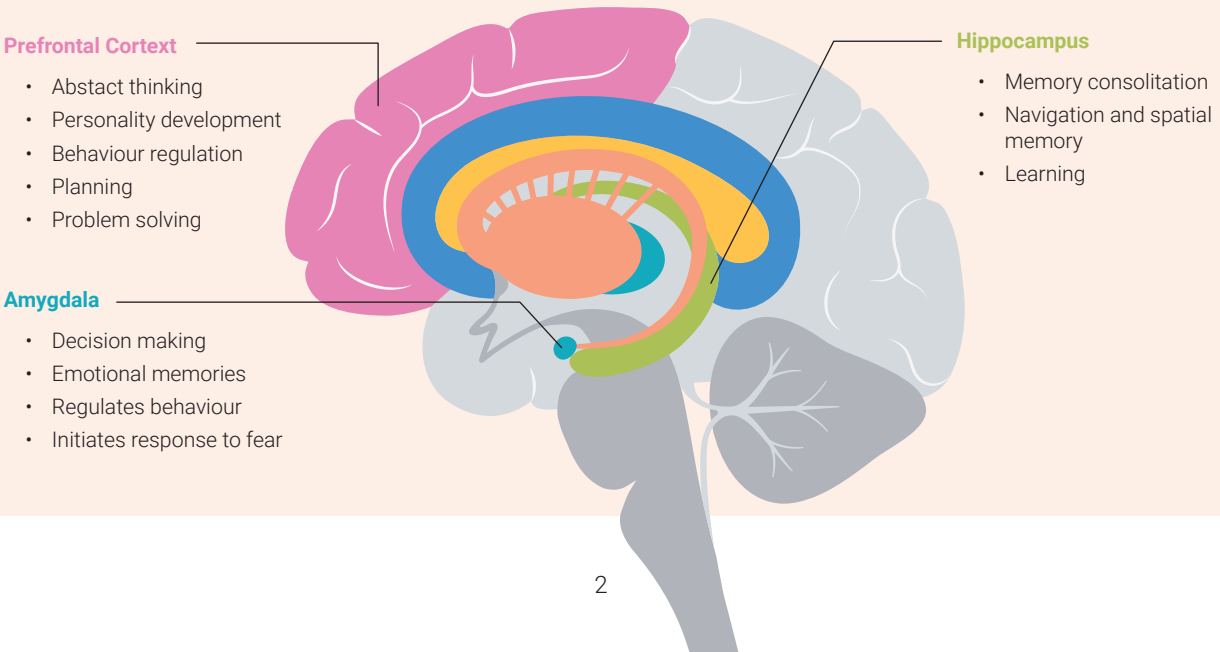
Complex PTSD is thought to be more severe if:

- the traumatic events happened early in life
- the trauma was caused by a parent or carer
- the person experienced the trauma for a long time
- the person was alone during the trauma
- there's still contact with the person responsible for the trauma

As well as experiencing the symptoms of PTSD the sufferer of CPTSD could also experience:

- difficulty controlling emotions
- dissociation (periods of losing attention and concentration
- physical symptoms (headaches, dizziness, chest pains, stomach aches etc.)
- relationship difficulties
- cut themselves off from friends and family
- destructive, high-risk behaviours (self-harm, alcohol or drug misuse).
- Suicidal thoughts

The diagram below shows the areas of the brain that are affected by PTSD and how it effects their functions.



Physical

There are many physical effects of trauma that are directly linked to the psychological disorders:

Pain	Sweating	Feeling Sick	Dizziness
Trembling	Shaking	Insomnia	Headaches
Chest pains	Heart Palpitations	Tiredness / Exhaustion	Irritable Bowel Disease

It is also possible that the 'wear and tear' of living with ongoing trauma has, over time, caused other physical illnesses. Research has linked trauma to stress related illnesses such as:

> *"chronic…breathing difficulties, asthma, frequent colds, sore throats; addictions such as alcohol or drug misuse…skin disorders such as eczema; gastro- intestinal problems…gynaecological disorders…a whole range of auto-immune disorders…and certain endocrine problems such as thyroid dysfunction…"*
> ***- Kim Etherington, 2003***

Emotional

Trauma also effects the emotional life. Initial emotions might be fear, anger, sadness and shame. Survivors may also experience some or all the following at various points:

- repression of emotions, due to fear of losing control
- denial of feelings associated with the trauma
- numbness and lack of emotion
- low self-esteem and lack of worth
- feel different or see themselves as 'damaged goods'
- somatisation (a focus on bodily symptoms as a way of avoiding emotional pain)
- dysregulation of emotions (anger, anxiety, sadness and shame)
- substance abuse
- compulsive behaviours e.g. overeating

Survivors might also discover creative, healthy ways to channel their emotions such as physical fitness or a passion for helping others who have suffered as they had.

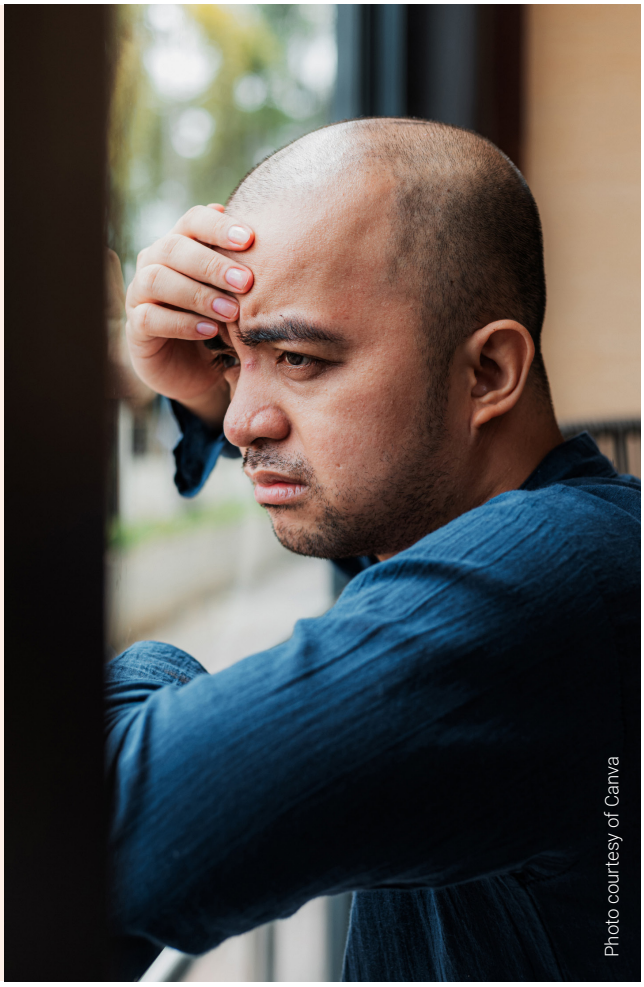


Photo courtesy of Canva

Behaviour

Many of the behavioural responses to trauma have already been mentioned as all four areas are so interrelated.

Avoidance	Hyperarousal	Difficulties Concentrating
Self-isolation	Relationship Difficulties	Distructive, Risky Behaviours

Survivors of trauma suffered at the hands of others may struggle to trust or be afraid of those in authority. This could affect the way they relate towards others or come out in their relationships. Some may associate elements of trauma with their current circumstances, reacting in the present as if they were still unsafe. Some survivors may try to take control by being assertive or even aggressive towards others, others may feel like they have no control, struggling to make even small decisions.

Resilience

Resilience allows a person to: adapt to challenges, feel connected to a family or community, develop self-regulatory skills, develop a positive self-view and feel motivated to change their environment or behaviours. As survivors develop resilience it can aid recovery and relationships going forward.

> *Resilience is the ability to recover from setbacks, adapt well to change and keep going or choose to give up the face of adversity, so we emerge stronger, wiser and more able.*
>
> **- The Oasis School of Human Relations**

Developing resilience can be helped by the six areas below:

Useful Videos

Hand Model - understanding the effects of trauma on the brain

Brain & amygdala hand model explains how thoughts & emotions fuel anxiety
https://empoweru.education - YouTube

The Effect Of Trauma On The Brain And How It Effects Behaviour

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9Pg4K1ZKws

Understanding PTSD's Effects on the Brain, Body and Emotions

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEHDQeIRTgs

How Trauma informed Care Saved my Life

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOoNIpr-7Tk

What Trauma Taught Me About Resilience

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qELiw_1Ddg

Vicarious Trauma

Drowning in Empathy: The Cost of Vicarious Trauma | Amy Cunningham | TEDxSanAntonio - YouTube

Further Reading and Useful Websites

Understanding The Effects Of Trauma

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/

Dr. Chris Cortman & Dr. Joseph Walden (2018) Keep Pain in the Past. Mango Publishing Group

PTSD UK

https://www.ptsduk.org/

Mind: For Better Mental Health

https://www.mind.org.uk