

Categories of Trauma

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So let's start with what trauma is. Trauma comes from many sources including events like child abuse and neglect, war, combat, natural disasters or medical trauma. How we experience trauma and how trauma affects us, is individual as each person. It depends on our own temperament, our own resiliency factors, and any past traumas we may have experience all of these things playing together and what impact this trauma may have.

Trauma tends to affect three primary groups of people: the person who experiences the event, the person who witnesses the event and then the situations it applies to. Sometimes the person who perpetrates the event and for example some times as we may work with someone who is experiencing symptoms that leads to behaviors that later on they feel remorse or have flashbacks of.

There're several official definitions of trauma and trauma informed services but as we know sometimes the best definitions come from people with lived experience. This is one way trauma informed services was explained to me. Trauma comes from any experience or we feel too much pain be it physical and/or emotional to when we're too scared, too worried, too anxious, too ashamed. These intense emotions and experiences leave a lasting impression on our mind and body and they cause actual changes in how our brain and heart grow and function. So an emotional injury now becomes a physical injury because important parts of our body have been affected. The symptoms of trauma are completely natural in our mind and body's way of calling for help. Trauma can sometimes have people make unsafe choices but these unsafe choices are made as an attempt as a relief to regulate or to feel better.

When people can understand the symptoms of trauma are completely natural and even to be expected, they can begin to forgive themselves, understand that they're not bad, and they aren't crazy, they're simply injured and affected by experiences in their environment.

Direct trauma is the simplest of all the different types of trauma. In that it means it happens directly to you, by you either physically experiencing it, or physically witnessing it.

Indirect trauma is a little different, in that you don't physically experience it, you don't physically witness it, but it still has a tremendous impact on you. One of the examples we could have is 9/11. Um, a lot of people saw the events of 9/11 unfolding on television. They were not physically there they did not physically witness it. However,

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when they did study six months post-9/11 and interview goes people that saw it happening live on television. There was a lot of people that had trauma symptoms. And still using that 9/11 example the, those effects can be different based on emotional and physical proximity. If you were in New York at the time and you experience some of those things but you weren't physically there or physically witnessing it but just felt the, were in the outskirts of the town, that may have one effect on you. If you were in California but you were watching and you knew that one of your family members was in the towers then that would have another effect on you.

Another example of experiencing indirect trauma might be that for some reason you aren't at work one day, your child is sick, you're out for a training, whatever may be going on and while you are not in the office something traumatic happens there and even though you weren't physically there to witness it and you weren't physically there to experience it, it is so going to impact you just because of your connection with coworkers and friends and family that were involved and so indirect trauma still has that impact on us whether we are there or not.

Acute trauma is a onetime event that happens under a limited amount of time. This could be like a sexual or physical assault, going through a natural disaster or possibly car wreck.

Chronic trauma is where an event may happen over and over and over again or it may be a multiple layering of events. For example, um chronic trauma might apply in cases of ongoing abuse, neglect, domestic violence, human trafficking, or it might be that someone has multiple events happen to them, they have cancer, they have, they're in a tornado, um they also are then in a car wreck, but that it's different types of trauma layering one on the other. What's important to understand about chronic trauma is that going through an event once may not be a protective factor but it can actually increase your risk factors for susceptibility when you go through another event. Outside of that there's also another way of looking at chronic trauma and that is the term insidious trauma.

And insidious trauma, is where it wasn't directed at you but it is all around you. This may be you live in a neighborhood with a very high um violence rate or you may be in a war torn region or there may be gang involvement, and so maybe the, maybe it's not specifically at you, but because you are completely surrounded by it, it has this huge toll. And that is what we look at as a subsection of chronic trauma as insidious trauma.

Complex trauma is a lot like chronic trauma, except that it happens at the inactions or actions of the caregiver the person that a child should be able to trust. Generally starts in the early years, like 0 to 6, even though it can go beyond that, that's where we generally see it starting. The importance of understanding complex trauma, is because it doesn't end when the trauma ends, it doesn't end when the abuse ends, it doesn't end when the domestic violence or assault ends or the neglect ends, and that's really important to understand.

A lot of times when people think a child has been through all of these traumatic events that when they're removed from the situation that they'll get better. But the truth is, we know the complex trauma has the potential to have a lifelong impact. The reason for this is that when a child is going through all of those traumatic events and they're going through that chronic trauma and the multiple types of trauma and the same traumas over and over, that the resources the brain and body would've used to develop its now using to survive. And so all of a sudden a lot of those developmental pieces both psychologically and physiologically are missed. And this also leads us into developmental stages being changed.

Complex trauma affects multiple areas of a child, adolescent, and adult's life. We see it play out through every single domain of functioning. One of the most important to talk about though is relationships. Because the trauma happened in relationship that is the main area we see it play out as someone becomes older. They may have extreme difficulty being in any type of safe and healthy relationship. That can be both that they are into many unsafe relationships, to the other extreme that they are very isolative and can't form any relationships at all. And so when we think about complex trauma, we need to understand it's not just the immediate impact but the long term impact that truly affects the health and wellbeing of that child and individual.

Organizational trauma and organizational stress are often two terms that are used interchangeably but often, but actually they are very different. Um, first let's talk a little bit about organizational trauma. Organizational trauma is when an entire organization is effected by traumatic event. So it can be something like a natural disaster or a sentinel event such as someone who works at the agency a passing away or a client passing away.

Organizational stress is the result of when organizations become stressed and this is based off of a concept or a principle called parallel processing. Parallel process is when two systems have enough interactions together that they begin to take on the attributes of the other system. And this is both regarding positive and negative attributes. Just keep in mind that systems can be individuals, groups, or organizations.

When we talk about vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress, one of the things we really want to do is differentiate that from professional burn out. So burn out is a different term and burn out has to do with being physically and emotionally exhausted typically from prolonged periods of time, um, being in a highly demanding, emotionally demanding work environment. But the biggest thing to remember about how burn out is different from vicarious trauma is that burn out, um, is possible in any profession.

Vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress are different because this happens when we as helpers are sitting and bearing witness to those that we're working with and their traumatic stories. Um, often when we are repetitively exposed to the traumatic stories others, we can begin to take on, um, the symptoms as if we ourselves were
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exposed to that traumatic event. So it really is the cumulative, transformative effect on the worker after working with survivors of traumatic life events. Vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress aren't just limited to those working with in the mental health profession. It really applies to anyone that's having firsthand experience with survivors of trauma. So this could apply to individuals who are working within the medical profession, um, the judicial system, um, or, those within the media.