

## Young Adults Uncovered: The Psychological Impact of Childhood Trauma Contextualizing Trauma Theory

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### ABSTRACT

A new epoch generation is more likely to experience childhood trauma because of the social and complex societal structures, hence it continues to be a prevalent social and psychological issue. Dissecting these layers rooted to trauma it can have multiple facets depending upon the events one goes through in life. It may be due to abuse and neglect, loss, violence, medical history, etc. Survivors of childhood trauma report far greater rates of anxiety, sadness, decreased cognitive function, personality flaws, and limited social support. These indicators could point to a social and psychological susceptibility to the emergence of mental illnesses as a result of traumatic experiences throughout infancy. This paper aims to explore the root cause of trauma and how it has affected the psychological well-being of youth. It also aims to study the alterations in their behavior.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Childhood, Violence, Abuse, Neglect

**T**rauma is rarely an everyday occurrence; but, when it does transpire, it can profoundly adversely affect an individual's life.

Trauma is an individual's account of a traumatic or perhaps fatal incident like a natural disaster or serious car accident which can be diagnosed if we see following symptoms like fatigue, disorientation, melancholy, apprehension, restlessness, insensitivity, dissociation, physiological arousal, and diminished emotional expression.

Whereas, childhood trauma is occurrence or series of events that a kid experiences during his childhood that are emotionally upsetting or painful. It can be the sudden loss of a family member, parental separation or divorce, or physical or sexual abuse and can be diagnosed if symptoms like persistent feelings of sadness, anxiety, or fear, difficulty forming trusting relationships, withdrawal from social activities, sudden changes in behaviour or mood, poor academic performance, physical complaints without apparent medical cause continue to persist. These experiences can cause substantial lifetime harm to a child's physical and mental health.

The trauma a youngster has experienced influences everything they do. Later in life, childhood trauma affects the overall well-being of a survivor because their brains are wired to

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the events they have been through. Therefore, is it important to contextualize trauma theory as it examines how individuals react mentally and emotionally to traumatic experiences that have a long-lasting effect on their wellbeing. It began with the legal and medical issues raised by the industrial revolution in the 19th century and has since expanded to include cultural trauma.

Many studies conducted in recent years have indicated that childhood trauma may have had a role in the increased risk of a variety of mental problems that persisted into adulthood. Nevertheless, the exact processes behind this link are still unknown and complex.

### ***Research Objectives***

- To investigate the rationale behind childhood trauma betwixt young adults of age 18-24.
- To analyze the psychological impact of childhood trauma on young adults with reference to trauma theory.
- To scrutinize the alterations in behavior of young adults suffering from childhood trauma.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literature review is a foundation to conduct rigorous and meaningful research. It is crucial for several reasons like contextualizing your study, identifying trends and patterns, avoiding duplication, building a theoretical framework, guiding research questions, supporting your methodology, establishing credibility and informing policy and practice. Using ten years of intensive literature review, different layers of trauma has been dissected.

Research like this one has often yielded findings indicating that children who are exposed to trauma suffer from numerous emotional and behavioral difficulties. For instance, according to Cohen et al. (2006), traumatized children exhibit symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Other than these emotional dysregulations, problems faced by children also encompass behaviors such as aggression and social withdrawal (Kisiel et al., 2014).

Experiences of child trauma have been related to deficits in cognitive functioning. A meta-analysis by Woon and Hazler(2010) indicated that traumatic experiences may impair memory, attention, and executive functioning, leading to lower academic performance. This cognitive impact may stem from the stress response systems being hijacked, which can interfere with the brain's development during critical growth periods (Teicher et al., 2003).

Children who experience trauma often struggle with forming healthy interpersonal relationships. According to Siegel (2012), trauma can disrupt attachment styles, leading to insecure attachments that affect peer relationships and family dynamics. Such disturbances may enter into a vicious cycle of isolation and further psychological turmoil.

The impact of childhood trauma may be lifelong for the adult. This idea was first published by Felitti et al (1998), who disclosed a strong association between childhood trauma and several adult health conditions, including mental health disorders, substance misuse, and chronic diseases. This result emphasizes how crucial early intervention and continuous assistance are.

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However, despite such pervasive effects of childhood trauma, some youths do show impressive resilience. Some key protective factors are found by Masten (2001) in the course of research, including supportive relationships, adaptive coping strategies, and a positive self-perception. Such factors may cushion the psychological blow of trauma and channel better developmental trajectories.

According to Trauma Theory, a childhood of adverse experiences has profound effects in terms of severe psychological disturbance and developmental handicap. According to Herman, "trauma interferes with victim's sense of self and safety and triggers symptoms which can occur along multiple levels of functioning". The importance of the trauma context: its forms, duration, and elements of individual's resilience are essential parts of this paradigm. Childhood trauma consists of several adverse experiences that occur in childhood, including maltreatment, neglect, and household dysfunction. Downey and Crummy (2022) report that adverse experiences may significantly impact the psychological and physical well-being of children, an influence that can continue into adulthood.

Matte-Landry et al. (2022) provide compelling evidence that complex trauma has significant adverse effects on cognitive outcomes in children. Their systematic evaluations and meta-analytic findings highlight the importance of understanding these cognitive impairments to inform interventions and support systems, ultimately aiming to improve the trajectories of children affected by complex trauma.

Matson et al. (2023) present vital information about how early trauma affects cognition and motor strategy abilities. The domains are linked with each other, so integrated trauma-informed interventions are the necessity brought in by scoping review. Their scoping review gives an understanding that by the treatment of sensory and motor issues, the quality of life in affected children can be enhanced remarkably.

In its endeavours to explore the consequences of childhood trauma, the Dye paper explores into the both the short-term and the long-term impact that may spread across every fiber of human life. The study combines existing literature into one paper to facilitate an integrated understanding of the multiple effects that early traumatic experience holds in the shaping of psychological, emotional, and social development.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach has been taken to fully raise awareness concerning the psychological effects of childhood trauma. Thematic analysis to identify common patterns and themes concerning the psychological influence of trauma. Grounded in the understanding that trauma can disrupt normal development and functioning. Key theorists like Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk provide frameworks for understanding trauma's effects on mental health, identity, and relationships. The research contextualizes findings within socio-cultural frameworks, acknowledging how culture, socio-economic status, and family dynamics influence trauma experiences and responses. This study has contextualized trauma theory to investigate psychological effects of childhood trauma upon young adults. Informed by the subtlety of trauma's effect, it can help create interventions and support strategies for affected individuals.

## **DISCUSSION**

The word "trauma" is Greek in origin and denotes "a wound, a hurt, or a defeat." From a psychological perspective, trauma describes an unpleasant event that results in erratic stress. Trauma is the reaction to a very bad occurrence, based on the American Psychological Association (APA). Trauma is described as "an emotional reaction to a traumatic event, such as a natural disaster, physical assault, or accident."

People use the word "trauma" a lot, sometimes without understanding what it means. This suggests that the term "trauma" is used with little to no knowledge of its true meaning. People frequently use the overly dramatic term "traumatized" to describe how terrified they were by an action or incident when recalling a bad experience. It is used less as a medical and psychiatric ailment and more to communicate something upsetting.

The study of Trauma has influenced many fields, including law, neuroscience, sociology, philosophy, literary studies, and many others. This indicates that while the different disciplines have their own specialized and specific motives and modes of research and methodology, the study of trauma has an impact and influence on the study of certain cases that involve a course of a series of traumatic events and will require basic understanding of the concept of trauma and its effects.

The widespread consensus is that trauma is a disturbing incident that affects how one organizes their emotions and perceives the outside world. Freudian psychoanalytical theories, which contend that the unconscious is founded on sexual urges, were the foundation for trauma studies when they initially emerged in the 1990s (Michelle Balaev). He also contends that death drives, which cause conflicts inside the ego, influence the unconscious. Freudian theories are based on unconscious desires and their influence on the ego and other mental activities.

Because the initial event still causes harm, Freud and Breuer stress in *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) that the original event was only traumatic in its memory and not in itself. This study mentions ways in which the therapist must incorporate the encouragement of uncovering unconscious desires, daydreams, and fantasies.

A shadow that subtly suggests the significance of trauma and the reality of the past is cast by its odd absence but spectral presence in consciousness and its abnormal integration into memory. *Trauma, Story, History: Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience* (1996).

Survivors of trauma often have symptoms that prevent normal functioning in most social setups, whether within the family, workplace, or another social group. Symptoms may be dangerous both physically and emotionally. These symptoms become associated with the memory of the event. The signs that indicate a person is suffering due to the adverse event experienced or witnessed, can be identified, as physical and psychological symptoms.

If we observe carefully there are visible symptoms in trauma survivors that we usually ignore and think is normal, genetic or maybe due to some other underlying disease but we forget that it all starts from the brain.

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Some of these symptoms are mentioned below:

### Psychological responses

- **Numbness**

Numbing is a natural biological process that separates emotions from thoughts, actions, and memories. This involves a person being unresponsive and ignorant of their bodily needs and feelings.

- **Guilt**

Attempting to make sense of a traumatic experience by assuming responsibility for the occurrence of the event. The person may feel remorse and regret, whenever reminded of the event.

- **Trauma-related hallucinations or delusions**

Trauma-related hallucinations and delusions. One who has been a victim may be emotionally disturbed, affecting him with such flashbacks of the incident as though they were carried back to the timeline in which that event occurred. The person hallucinating has to go through the course of the traumatic episode all over again.

- **Confusion**

Diverting the real meaning of a situation and assuming that it is meant to cause harm to them. People start perceiving ordinary, everyday events as threatening and act cautious to even the smallest change in the environment around them.

- **Triggers and flashbacks**

A trigger is a stimulus that causes a memory of a specific characteristic of a traumatic experience. For instance, a war veteran fears a loud noise like that of a firework; this noise reminds him of the time spent and the struggle he had during the war.

A flashback is when you relive a previous painful incident as if it were happening right now. An example of a flashback could be when a person feels anxious and overwhelmed under pressure, reminding them of when they experienced or witnessed some stressful situation.

### Physical responses

- **Headaches**

Headaches and migraines can be caused due to strain and overthinking/constantly thinking about the same event, or when the person experiences flashbacks, accompanied by severe headaches.

- **Digestive symptoms**

Having stomach pain and digestive issues causes problems for the body to digest and absorb nutrition, leading to repeated discomfort. This may be accompanied

- **Fatigue**

The grief or fear instilled in the person physically drains the energy and motivation to be productive and function in a socially active manner regularly.

- **Feeling anxious, sad, or angry**

The person or group of people who experienced a traumatic episode have mixed feelings and emotions, which may lead to confusion regarding the current mental state and sense of self.

- **Trouble concentrating**

Prolonged mental suffering caused by the memories or flashbacks of the event experienced or witnessed, may lead to people losing their focus and causing hindrance in daily tasks and functioning, ultimately affecting productivity in terms of health, and exercise and restricting social involvement.

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It is important to realize that each person's response to stressful situations is unique to them. What might be traumatic for one person, may not have the same mental consequence for another person. The study of Trauma and its impact itself is a hard concept to research on, as it becomes a problem of categorizing and ranking the experiences of people, as these experiences vary from person to person, with their subjective interpretations and differences in the coping mechanisms of each individual. For example, a person may be high in coping and adapting while being low in strategic and systematic planning of how to go about overcoming the negative effects of the traumatic experience, implying that the person is willing to live with the memories of the event haunting them instead of facing it with courage and making peace with it. It may therefore be inferred that it is rather not possible to classify the severity of a traumatic event, rather as it depends on not only environmental factors but also the genetic makeup and fight-and-flight impulses of an individual.

Therefore, the interaction of a myriad of biological, psychological, environmental, and physical factors determines the individual response to trauma. Let's delve a little deeper to understand the possibilities for occurrence of trauma in young adults.

While studying the different theories of Trauma, most importantly Trauma Theory and the accounts given by veterans and genocide survivors, we can point out that the impact of trauma and its magnitude is different for various individuals, concerning the social, and cultural context as well as the timeline of the occurrence of the event, keeping note of the availability of aid and technology. Factors like age, gender, relational status at home and with peers, the economic condition of the household, etc., play an important role in determining how the event affects the individual.

There are many different ways that trauma manifests and develops. The factors causing trauma may be deliberate and forced, (hate crimes, political instability leading to wars between nations) or they can be due to natural causes (natural disasters like floods, famines, earthquakes). People across different and all kinds of age groups are vulnerable to experiencing negative and distressful consequences of the event experienced or witnessed. There are certain contributing factors to developing an adverse reaction to trauma.

Some of them are given as follows:

- 1. Abusive Environment:** People living in an abusive household are more susceptible to anxiety disorders and other severe implications. The pressure caused by unpleasant situations results in increased mental overload.
- 2. Genetics:** People are prone to developing post-traumatic stress disorders because they are more genetically vulnerable due to the difference in their genetic makeup
- 3. Loss of a loved one:** The unexpected sudden and traumatic death of a close one can have a deep impact on the individual. Such a situation may lead to the person feeling lonely and remorseful.
- 4. War and conflicts:** Displacement or persecution scars a person and their perception and sense of security and self. This may lead to insecurity and doubtful behaviour.
- 5. Bullying:** When the person experiences social exclusion, discrimination, and other acts of hate, it can evoke feelings of anxiety and helplessness.

## DIMENSIONS OF TRAUMA

- **Nature of the event:** This may include the death of a loved one or the experience of betrayal. The more repeated these events are, the more traumatic they become.
- **What effect it has on the person:** A person's subjective experiences determine and shape how traumatic an event may prove to be. The coping mechanisms and adaptation abilities determine the magnitude of the severity of the event.
- **Witnessing a violent event:** After seeing something from a distance, people can get shocked. This may have a deep impact on the morals, beliefs, and value system of the individual. Children are more vulnerable to this condition.

Again, it is to be noted that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' reasons for the person to have unpleasant reactions and bad memories associated with an event.

The socio-cultural, economic, and political background of the individual also influences the level of impact a fearful event might have on the individual. The intensity of the after-effects of the traumatic experience differs from person to person, depending on their ability to cope with the situation and environmental conditions.

The dilemma caused inside the brains of the people has a significant connection to what event they have been through. Why because when checked, the people did have an impact on their neurological functioning which caused them to think abnormally. Now that half of them were left undiagnosed with trauma, they showcased a different set of behavioral changes.

The behavioral changes observed in trauma survivors are as follows:

1. **Unhealthy behaviours:** Substance use, smoking, early sexual activity, and other high-risk behaviours
2. **Self-medicating:** Alcohol abuse or other self-medicating behaviours
3. **Compulsive behaviours:** Overeating or other compulsive behaviours
4. **Self-injurious behaviours:** Self-harming or other self-injurious behaviours
5. **Aggressive behaviours:** Being aggressive or subconsciously reenacting aspects of the trauma
6. **Learned helplessness:** Acting like they can't control their current environment
7. **Interpersonal distress:** Being domineering/controlling, overly accommodating, self-sacrificing, or intrusive/needy
8. **Anti-social behaviour:** Presenting with unrelated matters, often frequently

Other behavioural changes in young adults who survived childhood trauma can include:

1. Depression, anxiety, or social withdrawal
2. Running away to what they perceive to be safer environments (try adding a word escape)
3. Loss of interest in school, friends, hobbies, and life in general
4. Pessimistic outlook on life, being cynical and distrusting of others
5. Difficulties with short-term memory, concentration and problem solving

According to trauma theory, it makes sense to investigate the source of trauma, how it changes a person's behaviour, and how it affects a person psychologically. Emphasis is put on how even a single experience in childhood can cause an enormous intervention in both emotional and cognitive development, causing the individual to develop specific behavioural patterns, that include avoidant behaviour, anxiety, and difficulty interacting socially. The relationship between trauma and behavioural reactions provides an explanation of how the

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stress system in our bodies works to encourage coping in the presence of traumatic experiences and the resultant consequences, which are often long-term. In grounding our analysis to the trauma theory, we demonstrate how such theories assist in formulating integration models, which treat both the source and symptoms of trauma. Adopting this multiple perspective is crucial for constructing appropriate therapeutic strategies of treatment, which enhance the recovery rate and resilience of the traumatized individuals.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to attain all the three objectives, (i) to investigate the rationale behind childhood trauma betwixt young adults of age 18-24. (ii) to analyse the psychological impact of childhood trauma on young adults with reference to trauma theory. (iii) to scrutinise the alterations in behaviour of young adults who survived childhood trauma. It is a fact that the roots of trauma hold an immense influence over lives of individuals and communities. Influences such as exposure to violence, neglect, and systemic adversity are crucial in the formation of trauma both in responses in the immediate sense and in psychological outcomes in the long term. The more practitioners and policymakers understand this interaction of elements, the more effective prevention and intervention strategies could be designed. Addressing the underlying conditions that lead to trauma therefore can help heal and give resilience and create a much healthier environment for future generations. The behavioral changes seen in young adults who survive childhood trauma remind us of the deep effects early unpleasant experiences have in the mental health and the social functioning of individuals. These individuals often grapple with a range of challenges, including emotional distress, withdrawal from social interactions, and diminished engagement in daily activities. The pervasive feelings of pessimism and distrust compound isolation, making it much more difficult for them to enter into healthy relationships. Cognitive impairment, including aspects like memory and concentration defects, underlines the fact that interventions and support groups should be focused on practical and psychological impacts of early childhood trauma. Understanding patterns like these is essential to develop appropriate therapeutic approaches for strengthening resilience in affected clients.

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The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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