

Silent Storms: The Invisible Impact of Psychological Trauma

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ABSTRACT

Psychological trauma can be explained as an earth-shattering event that destroys an individual's sense of security, leading them to feel helpless and hopeless. Understanding the impact of psychological trauma on human development has various benefits. For instance, it helps in early intervention and support by aiding in the identification of individuals who are at risk for mental and physical health problems. This paper aims to shed light on the emotional, behavioural, and cognitive impacts of trauma on children and provide valuable insights into early interventions and therapeutic approaches that would support the trauma recovery of children. Realizing and understanding the presence and effects of psychological trauma would enable mental health professionals to better recognize signs of psychological trauma, offer trauma-informed care, and improve client outcomes.

Keywords: *Psychological Trauma, Childhood, Development, Trauma-Informed Approach, Psychological Intervention, Mental Health*

Trauma can be defined as an individual response to an event he/she finds immensely stressful, such as a disaster, an accident, a war zone, etc. Such events (a severely distressing event) cause damage to the mind, which is called psychological trauma. Trauma often results from experiencing such overwhelming levels of stress that exceed an individual's coping ability. The inability to cope with such events could eventually lead to serious long-term psychological (mental and emotional) consequences. However, it should be noted that not everyone who experiences a traumatic event develops trauma.

An incident that a child finds dangerous, violent, or even frightening and that possesses a threat to his/her life may result in a traumatic experience for the child. A child may also be traumatised after witnessing harm being caused to a loved one. It is important to note that a child's sense of security heavily relies on the perceived safety of their attachment figures.

If life is a narrative, the tone is established early on. As a result, a person's early years are equally filled with opportunity and risk. A child's brain is built, instance by instance, as they engage and interact with their environment. To achieve their full potential, as is their right, they require not just health care but also protection from any form of harm along with a strong sense of security. All of these cumulatively nourish a child's brain and fuel the development of their bodies.

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When a child experiences trauma, the price they pay is in lost potential; this includes going through life with poor mental health, struggling to learn, and eventually struggling to earn a livelihood. Therefore, this paper aims to shed light on the psychological impact of trauma in childhood and provide early intervention strategies that will help in preventing the long-term ill effects of trauma among children and facilitate leading healthier lives.

TYPES AND SOURCES OF TRAUMA

Types of traumas:

We can divide trauma into three basic categories: acute, chronic, and complicated.

1. **Acute trauma:** A person who has had a single, extremely traumatic event may develop this sort of trauma. It should be noted that acute trauma can lead to long-term negative mental health consequences if not addressed timely and properly. Acute trauma could lead to acute stress disorder, which typically shows up within three days of the traumatic experience and lasts up to a month on average. For example, an individual experiencing a sudden and/or violent accident.
2. **Chronic trauma:** A person who has been experiencing either ongoing, prolonged, or repeated exposure to traumatic events may develop this form of trauma. This differs from acute, which only involves a single traumatic event. For example, a child being bullied at school or someone facing ongoing domestic violence.
3. **Complex trauma:** A person who has been experiencing chronic, prolonged, and chronic exposure to highly traumatic events may develop this type of trauma. For example, an individual being repeatedly sexually exploited/violated or a child growing up in a neglectful home.

Trauma can further be classified into the following types based on its impact on an individual's life (Kira, 1997):

1. **Attachment trauma:** This type of trauma affects the affective exchange of children with their parents or of an adult with their companion. It affects, for the child, the sense of trust and security, and for the adult, the sense of connectedness and warmth. Such traumas can lead to avoidant or disordered attachment styles as well as relationship or personality disorders.
2. **Individuation (personal/collective) trauma:** Since the formation of a sense of identity and self-efficacy is a developmental landmark for an individual in their late adolescence, any identity or autonomy trauma can destroy the emotional and behavioral independence of the person, leading to feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and alienation. Some examples of such traumas would include prisoners of war, domestic violence, torture, etc.
3. **Interdependence or Disconnectedness Trauma:** Humans, being social animals, are interlocked within a network of connections that gives them social, material, and emotional support. Events that threaten an individual's social embeddedness can cause trauma. For example, a child having to move from school to school would experience disconnectedness trauma as he/she would lose their support system after every school change.
4. **Survival trauma:** A person experiences this type of trauma when they encounter an event that directly or indirectly threatens their self/lives or that of their significant others. For example, exposure to drive-by shootings, violent crimes, or car accidents (Arndt, 1997).

Sources of trauma:

1. **Interpersonal trauma:** Trauma can often be caused in situations where an individual is directly harmed by another individual. For example, bullying, emotional abuse, child neglect, physical or sexual abuse.
2. **Social or collective trauma:** This form of trauma includes trauma caused by society or one's community wherein harm is caused by widespread violence or societal systems. For example, terrorism, forced migrants, hate crimes based on one's gender or identity, oppression or discrimination, etc.
3. **Environmental or situational trauma:** Unexpected events in an individual's life that cause fear, loss, or injury can also lead to trauma. For example, major accidents, sudden homelessness, public health emergencies, etc.
4. **Medical trauma:** Individuals who experience difficult health-related and medical-related problems can also suffer from trauma. For example, long hospital stays, medical neglect or errors, life-threatening disease, etc.
5. **Grief and separation trauma:** Experiencing loss can be a deeply traumatic event for an individual. For example, loss of a beloved pet, loss of a job, or suicide or violent death of a loved one.

Psychological Consequences of Trauma

Exposure to a traumatic incident can lead to emergence of a variety of psychological, including emotional and behavioural consequences for an individual. Some of these include feeling fear, anger, or guilt, self-medicating, not maintaining one's daily routine, not being able to stop thinking about the incident, etc. A few long-term psychological consequences may include a sense of losing one's identity, difficulty with emotion regulation, and changes in one's behavior.

It is crucial that people who have had traumatic experiences receive proper support to avoid lasting effects of trauma. Unresolved trauma can eventually cause emotional detachment or numbness. Furthermore, people may try to avoid being in situations that remind them of the instances, even at the cost of withdrawing from their normal life. This not only hinders their recovery but also prevents them from living their lives to the fullest.

The stress response that one's body engages in to deal with the traumatic event creates a myriad of mental health problems. Survivors of trauma are at a high risk of posttraumatic stress disorder along with other mental health conditions such as sleep problems and disorders, anxiety disorders, panic attacks, emotional dysregulation, dissociative disorders, and acute stress disorder.

However, there is always a possibility that trauma can lead to mood and anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder (Carr, 2013). Trauma is also a major predictor of PTSD which is characterized by avoidance behaviour, re-experiencing, and hyperarousal (Kessler, 1995). Children who experience trauma may resolve to dissociation and emotional detachment as a coping mechanism (van der Kolk, 1996). Furthermore, such children might also experience difficulties with trust if they experience trauma in early relationships as it disrupts their secure attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In addition, it is important to also consider the impact of trauma on one's cognitive functions such as memory, attention, and decision-making, especially when exposed to early life stress (Pechtel & Pizzagalli, 2011). Moreover, individuals who have a history of trauma have a significantly higher risk of suicidal ideation and non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) (Afifi, 2008)

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The lasting strength of these consequences depends on the environment one is raised in, how well they have coped with the trauma, and what support system was available to the person.

Practical Implications

Developing an understanding of psychological trauma has many benefits for mental health professionals. Mental health professionals need to adopt a trauma-informed approach, which includes concepts like peer support, empowerment, trustworthiness, and safety (SAMHSA, 2014). Mental health professionals who are well-versed with the symptoms of trauma are able to swiftly and smoothly modify their interactions to avoid re-traumatizing an individual as well as help foster emotional safety (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014).

Counselors who understand the psychological impact of trauma are able to initiate preventive mental health support, which helps in reducing the long-term academic, social, and psychological consequences (Durlak, 2011). Furthermore, trauma-informed counselors can serve the function of a secondary attachment figure for the children. Therefore, their understanding of trauma and its psychological impact is crucial (Cook, 2005). In addition, trauma-informed counselors are better able to create a safer and more inclusive classroom environment, as they understand the difficulties such children face, including academic disengagement and truancy (Perfect, 2016).

Furthermore, a correct diagnosis is crucial in ensuring that the child gets the correct intervention. Being a trauma-informed counselor helps in mislabeling children with traumatic experiences as having ADHD, ODD, or any learning disability (Debellis & Zisk, 2014).

Mental health professionals working in the education field who are trained in trauma-sensitive practises can also help buffer the psychological impact of trauma on children's mental health (Murray, 2015). The behaviour of such children in a school setting is likely to get misinterpreted as disciplinary problems leading to exclusionary practises like expulsion and suspension (Overstreet and Chafouleas, 2016). This can be prevented by adequately training the mental health staff at schools in trauma-informed practises (Alisic, 2012).

Lastly, early intervention, which includes services that are aimed at preventing children who are at risk of experiencing problems related to their psychological or physiological well-being, can significantly help in reducing the psychological impact of trauma. Intervening at the right and critical development stage, for example, early childhood or adolescence, aids in not only building resilience but also neurobiological recovery (Lieberman & Van Horn, 2008). Furthermore, early intervention also helps in reducing the symptoms, decreasing the future need for intensive services, and improving outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the various profound psychological consequences of trauma on children across various domains. This paper emphasizes how trauma, if left untreated and unrecognized, can impact an individual's functioning severely across the lifespan. By understanding these impacts, mental health professionals will be better able to offer support as well as trauma informed responses that would promote resilience and healing.

This paper also underscores the vital need for early identification as well as intervention along with sensitive relational support, particularly during childhood when an individual's

brain and personality are most malleable. Therefore, a trauma-informed approach is not just beneficial- it is necessary in clinical environments.

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Conflict of Interest

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