

Understanding Trauma

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Existence of Trauma

Trauma affects all people in all walks of life. Being informed of how a serious event or series of events creates and influences the functioning and development of individuals is important for service providers and community members alike. Knowing what can cause trauma, how it impacts individuals and families and how to support and seek support can be key to an individual's ability to move forward after the trauma.

Causes of Trauma

What causes trauma is multifaceted and at times not always obvious. Many people are familiar with the "shocking events" such as car accidents, rape, armed robbery, loss of limb and acts of war, among many other defining events. Many are not as familiar with the more elusive trauma such as growing up in home with the presence of addiction, abuse or neglect, residential schools, instability and inconsistency that often erodes a person's development.

Sometimes it is not always clear at first glance that a person's present perspective or life choices have been influenced by past traumatic experiences. What causes trauma can be as complex as the impact it leaves behind. Regardless, everyone is susceptible to experiencing trauma.

What is Trauma

Trauma is a wound. Often an invisible wound. Trauma occurs when a person is confronted with a threat to the physical integrity of self or another where the threat overwhelms coping resources and evokes subjective responses of intense helplessness, terror and horror. Often, intense feelings of helplessness, loss of control or fear occurs when the normal responses of fight or flight are ineffective or overwhelmed.

Common Impact of Trauma

Re-experiencing the event after it is over is the foundation of the impact. The event occurred in the past, yet at times – occasionally or frequently – the event(s) dominate the individual's thoughts, reactions, perceptions, emotions or body sensations. For the individual affected, not feeling in control can be demoralizing, scary and lead an individual to avoid areas of life for fear of re-experiencing or not be able to control the flood of memories and sensations.

A whole spectrum of symptoms can exist from mild to severe. No one person is impacted in exactly the same way as another. However, common experiences still exist.

Some symptoms may include;

- Hyper arousal, hyper vigilance, hyperactivity, restlessness.
- Mental response: disorientation, mind spins, on edge, worried.
- Shock, disbelief, denial.
- Anger, fear, sorrow, confusion, self-blame.
- Avoidance of situations that remind them of the trauma (such as not driving in a certain area of town, avoiding certain people, etc.).
- Avoidance of stimulus that remind person of trauma (such as intimacy).
- Intrusive thoughts and emotions.
- Shame and guilt.
- Re-experiencing the traumatic event, possibly through:
 - Intrusive thoughts or images of the event.
 - Dreams or nightmares.
 - Flashbacks about the event (prompted by images, sounds, smells, etc.).
- Distress when exposed to events that remind them of the trauma.
- Chronic activation after the event itself is over (nervous system relives trauma).
- Increased anxiety or fear.
- Feeling their view of themselves or the world has been altered.
- A disruption of perception of self and the world such as; “I am vulnerable,” “The world unsafe,” “People cannot be trusted,” “There is something wrong or damaged about me,” “No one notices me.”
- Addictions and compulsive behaviors.

Many factors also help to mitigate or complicate the effects *after* a traumatic event occurs. Factors can include: person’s self perception of the event(s), presence of positive or negative support, degree of public awareness, or presence or absence of love and affection.

Support and Direction

Recognizing trauma is an important first step. Many people do manage to regain a sense of balance and stability on their own and find ways to continue to manage the stress of daily living. For others, support is needed to assist them in regaining perspective and to help manage the often overwhelming new experiences in a new reality.

Unfortunately, stigmas and misunderstandings still exist which can interfere with a person feeling comfortable in seeking supports, both professional and personal. First of all, if you have been impacted by trauma, know you are not alone and support is available. If you are a family member, friend, or professional who has contact with those impacted by trauma, there are also resources available. The school, family doctor or local counselling centre can be good places to start.

About the Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute Inc.

CTRI provides professional training and consulting services for individuals, communities and organizations affected by or involved in working with issues of crisis and trauma. For more details visit their website at www.ctrinstitute.com