

Abuse-Related Trauma

Trauma Defined:

Trauma is part of the human experience, whether by acts of nature or by acts of people. Traumatic events can **overwhelm a person's ability to cope** and result in a variety of post-traumatic responses. Psychological trauma may develop from many kinds of life-threatening or emotionally overwhelming events. They may be single event traumas, such as a car accident or natural disaster, or trauma that lasts over a period of time, such as child abuse and neglect.

Trauma can change the way a person develops, emotionally and psychologically. Traumatic events can disrupt your emotions, memory, consciousness and sense of self. Trauma can affect your relationships and attachments to others. It can change the way your brain and body work.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a specific type of anxiety that persists longer than one month after a traumatic event. It is a normal response to extreme harm, but not every individual who experiences trauma will have PTSD. It is characterized by: intrusive memories and re-experiencing of the event; numbing and avoidance behaviours; generalized state of agitation, irritability and distress.

“**Abuse related trauma**” or “**complex trauma**” responses may result if the abuse:

- Was repeated and happened over a long period of time
- Escalated over time
- Happened early in life
- Was committed by a child's caregivers
- Occurred during a time of critical development, as in childhood

Child sexual abuse and neglect can result in complex trauma responses.

The Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finklehor and Browne, 1985)

This model presents a way of organizing and categorizing our understanding of the effects of childhood sexual abuse. The four main states include:

1. Traumatic sexualization

This is a process where a child's sexuality (sexual feelings and attitudes) is shaped in a developmentally inappropriate fashion. The child's body is sexualized in a way that meets the child's non-sexual needs (for affection, love) through sexual behaviour. The child may be rewarded for sexual behaviour, either through gifts, affection or friendship. The child's normal sexual development is interfered with, and she/he learns incorrect information about sexual behaviour.

2. Loss and Betrayal

This happens when someone on whom the child is vitally dependent harms the child. The child's trust and vulnerability are manipulated. The child's health and well being are ignored. The child does not receive the normal love, affection and nurturing that she/he needs.

3. Powerlessness

The child's boundaries (of body, will, wishes) are invaded and violated. The child feels helpless to protect him/herself or to stop the abuse.

4. Stigmatization

This refers to the negative messages (badness/shame/guilt/self-blame) that a child receives from the abuser and others about the abuse. The offender may blame the child and treat him/her in a degrading manner. The child may be pressured to keep the abuse a secret, and is given the impression that the abuse is her/his fault. If the child feels any pleasure during the abuse, or has conflicting good feelings towards the abuser, the feeling of shame is increased.