

Trauma Reactions

Definition of trauma: A trauma is any event that poses a significant threat to life or stability. A trauma falls outside of the normal range of events and is so overwhelming that typical coping mechanisms do not work. Examples are witnessing a homicide or another violent incident, a school shooting, sexual assault, a natural disaster, situations involving unexpected death, etc.

What happens when one experiences trauma

1. Enter into an alarm state, which is often called the “fight or flight” response
 - a. Increased activity in nervous system that prepares your body to fight or to run
 - b. Increased heart rate
 - c. Increased blood pressure
 - d. Increased respiration
 - e. Adrenaline rush
 - f. Muscles tense
 - g. Hypervigilance
 - h. Tuning out of non-critical information
 - i. Highly adaptive but primitive (lower level of brain functioning)
 - j. May also “freeze”
2. Acute post-trauma reaction
 - a. Slowly “come down”, leaving alarm state
 - b. Begin to pay attention to internal stimuli (thoughts & feelings) rather than the external threat (first sense that you are scared)
 - c. Begin trying to process or figure out what happened
3. Emotional memories “flood” with each remembrance
 - a. Even minor triggers
 - b. Total re-experiencing of fear and pain
 - c. Reactivation of physiological alarm state (increased heart rate, hyper vigilance, strong startle response) but may appear normal outwardly
 - d. Uncomfortable and exhausting
4. Avoidance mechanisms to avoid re-experiencing the trauma
 - a. Physical avoidance of triggers/associations (places, people, certain activities)
 - b. Emotional numbing/dissociation – mental mechanism by which one disengages, withdraws attention from outside world and “goes away” to inner world

5. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

- a. In 1st few weeks, re-experiencing, hyper vigilance and avoidance are normal
- b. If symptoms persist, PTSD or other disorders may develop
- c. Persistence indicates the need for professional intervention

Trauma reactions particular to children

Children do not have to be eyewitnesses to be traumatized. Even if the child was not in the room at the time of the violence, they may have seen what led up to the violent episode, heard it occur, and certainly saw the aftermath... dragging herself to the front porch and pitching forward.

Children may also be re-traumatized at the time of disclosure, even if the event/abuse actually occurred years prior.

Discussion Question: What behaviors or demeanor would you expect to see in a traumatized child on a scene?

ACUTE REACTIONS

Children try to process by stating what happened over and over again. Example of my interview with a 3 year old child who said repeatedly "Daddy shot Mommy in the eYou may also hear a child repeating things. A traumatized child may also want to show you what happened by acting out the event or by drawing elements of the event. This sometimes looks like attention seeking but serves a more important purpose.

Children's dissociative symptoms may include "gazing off", being unresponsive or giving responses that are unclear (may seem evasive). Remember that during the trauma, we are at a lower level of brain functioning, so recall is not as good (recall is higher level cortical functioning).

You may also see children running around and generally displaying a high activity level. This is an indication that their bodies are still in a state of arousal. "Get on the ground!" example

Children may play and laugh after witnessing a horrific event. This is avoidance; they are trying to distract themselves from the anguish and anxiety they are experiencing.

Traumatized children often become very clingy, to anything that provides them with a sense of safety (this may be their caregiver or it may be you/another adult on scene).