

Traumatic and Subtle Abuse

Traumatic Abuse

Trauma can occur in a wide range of circumstances and within a variety of contexts. Current research indicates that childhood and/or adult trauma may be at the root of a broad spectrum of disorders. When trauma goes untreated, it can impact many aspects of your life, manifesting in a variety of symptoms. Some of these symptoms may be obviously related to the trauma; other symptoms may be clouded in lack of awareness to the connection.

Emotional Symptoms:

Trauma may be at the root of some of our most painful emotions. Depression, anxiety, worry, phobias, feelings of hopelessness, feelings of helplessness, excessive guilt, and shame are common emotional themes resulting from a history of traumatic experiences. Victims of earlier trauma often describe feelings of emptiness, powerlessness, and inadequacy.

Cognitive Symptoms:

Trauma plays a major role in shaping belief systems. It can often be an underlying factor in negative thinking patterns, stemming from negative beliefs about the self established during earlier traumatic events. It is also common for victims of trauma to experience problems with concentration, memory, decision-making, and distraction.

Behavioral Symptoms:

Addictive and compulsive behaviors (drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, spending, and eating disorders) are often linked to the desire to distract from the pain of the trauma or to numb emotional experiences that have become overly intense because of their link to earlier trauma. Anger, impulsiveness, problems with personal boundaries, and social withdrawal are all potential behavioral after-effects of earlier trauma.

Relationship Problems:

Trauma most often occurs within the context of a relationship therefore contributing to the victim's definition of "relationship". This can result in the continual repetition of unhealthy relationship patterns. Trauma can also contribute to withdrawal, isolation, lack of trust, fear of abandonment and the resulting boundary and "clinging" problems, inability to see relationships clearly, and control issues.

Physical Symptoms:

Common physical symptoms of traumatic history include a racing heart, high blood pressure, exaggerated startle responses, sleep problems, headaches, low energy, appetite changes, sexual dysfunction, gastrointestinal distress, and muscle tension resulting from constant hyper-vigilance.

Spiritual Symptoms:

Painful trauma can make it difficult to accept life or life's realities. Fear, anxiety, depression, lack of trust, and hyper-vigilance can make it difficult to find the energy or desire to connect with your own inner self. Trauma symptoms can make it difficult to get in touch with your own personal pain, making it difficult to connect with a spiritual source.

PTSD:

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that develops after a terrifying physical or life threatening event. PTSD affects the stress hormones and chemicals that carry information between the nerves. During the traumatic event, the person experiences intense fear, helplessness, powerlessness, inadequacy, and horror. With PTSD, these emotions recur in a variety of circumstance creating a re-experiencing of the traumatic event.

People with PTSD re-experience the event again and again in at least one of several ways. They may have frightening dreams and memories of the event, feel as though they are going through the experience again (flashbacks), or become upset during anniversaries of the event.

Symptoms of PTSD fall into three main categories:

1. Repeated "reliving" of the event, which disturbs day-to-day activity

- Flashback episodes, where the event seems to be happening again and again
- Recurrent distressing memories of the event
- Repeated dreams of the event
- Physical reactions to situations that remind you of the traumatic event

2. Avoidance

- Emotional "numbing," or feeling as though you don't care about anything
- Feelings of detachment – from self and others
- Inability to remember important aspects of the trauma
- Lack of interest in normal activities
- Staying away from places, people, or objects that remind you of the event
- Hopelessness about the future

3. Arousal

- Difficulty concentrating
- Exaggerated response to things that startle you
- Excess awareness (hypervigilance)
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Sleeping difficulties

You also might feel a sense of guilt about the event and the following symptoms, which are typical of anxiety, stress, and tension:

- Agitation, or excitability
- Dizziness
- Fainting
- Feeling your heart beat in your chest (palpitations)
- Fever
- Headache

Subtle Abuse

Subtle abuse may be even more impactful than traumatic abuse. Recovery from subtle abuse is much more complex simply because it is, at first, difficult to accept as abuse. Traumatic abuse is clearly defined; subtle abuse is less clear. It is easy to dislike or even hate your traumatic abuser; your subtle abuser may be someone that you love or care about.

Subtle abuse may come at the hands of well-meaning, but unconscious, parents or partners. These individuals can love you deeply and behave with abusive patterns because of their lack of understanding, their unhappiness, or their own unresolved issues. Your parent's ability to completely accept, love, and nurture you was completely linked to their ability to accept, love, and nurture themselves.

Your parents may have thought that they were parenting correctly because it was how they were parented or because of societal messages about appropriate parenting. The subtle abuse of childhood teaches you to accept abusive relationships in your adult life. These abusive patterns become your definition of "relationship".

Your adult relationship partners may also think that they are relating appropriately for largely the same reasons as your parents.

Childhood abuse must be resolved and present relationships must become healthy for the individual to become powerful and satisfied in their own life.

Subtle Abuse Takes Many Forms

Domination

People who dominate others need to be in charge, and they often try to control another person's every action. They have to have their own way and they will often resort to threats to get it.

When you allow yourself to be dominated by someone else, you begin to lose respect for yourself, and you become silently enraged. Someone else is in control of your life, just as assuredly as if you were a slave doing what you were ordered to do. You are no longer the master of your own destiny.

There was little choice when you were a child. If your parents were domineering, there was little you could do to change that. As an adult, you have the power to make changes.

Over-protection is a form of domination stemming from a parent's real or imagined fear for your safety in this world.

Verbal Assaults

This set of behavior involves berating, belittling, criticizing, name calling, screaming, threatening, blaming, and using sarcasm and humiliation. This kind of abuse is extremely damaging to the victim's self-esteem and self-image. Just as assuredly as physical violence assaults the body, verbal abuse assaults the mind and spirit, causing wounds that are extremely difficult to heal. Not only is this kind of abuse demeaning, but it is frightening as well.

Parents are forming our self-esteem at a core level. Verbal assault from parents is especially damaging. We see these messages as true reflections of our core identity.

Abusive Expectations

Here, the abuser places unreasonable demands on you, and you are expected to put aside everything to satisfy his or her needs. This abuser demonstrates a constant need for your undivided attention, demands

frequent sex, or requires you to spend all of your free time with him or her. But no matter how much time or attention you give, it is never enough; this person can never be pleased, because there is always something more you could have done. You are subjected to constant criticism, and you are constantly berated because you don't fulfill all of this person's needs.

As a child, the abusive expectation would have been manifested in expectations of perfect behavior, perfect beauty and grooming, or inordinate success. You may have felt required to perform at high levels in areas where you weren't capable or were uninterested. You were probably being used to fill your parent's need for self-esteem, not your own. Often, this is felt by the child but can be difficult to communicate to the parent. The parent is usually unconscious of the fact that they are meeting their needs through their children.

Emotional Blackmail

Emotional blackmail is one of the most powerful forms of manipulation. An emotional blackmailer either consciously or unconsciously coerces another person into doing what he or she wants by playing on that person's fear, guilt, or compassion. Women, in particular, are easily exploited because they tend to place other's wishes and feelings ahead of their own. They can be made to feel guilty simply for thinking of their own needs and feelings first.

When someone rejects you or distances themselves from you until you give in to their demands, they are emotionally blackmailing you.

Parents commit emotional blackmail when they withdraw their love, punish excessively, refuse to understand you, or punish you with silence. When they use guilt or shame to coerce behaviors they are using emotional blackmail for control.

Unpredictable Responses

In this type of abusive situation, the abuser has drastic mood swings or sudden emotional outbursts for no apparent reason. There could simple be inconsistent responses to the same behavior on your part. Whenever someone in your life reacts very differently at different times to the same behavior from you, tells you one thing one day and the opposite the next, or frequently changes his or her mind you are being abused with unpredictable responses. This behavior forces you to be constantly on edge.