

Childhood Trauma



Understanding ACEs, Trauma and Behavior



1. Terminology: Trauma and Traumatic Stress

What is Trauma?

Trauma is the experience of an event that threatens one's safety or health, causing emotional distress.



Physical Trauma



- Accident
- Earthquake
- Flood
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse

Emotional Trauma



- Verbal abuse
- Threats of harm
- Unsafe environment
- Loss of a loved one
- Witnessing physical abuse
- Neglect

Traumatic Experiences

Acute Traumatic Experience

- Single event
- Examples: Motor vehicle accident, single assault, flood, house fire
- *With emotional support:*
 - Expect good outcome relatively quickly



Complex Trauma is the key for ACEs



Complex Trauma

- Long term repetitive abuse
- Intentional
- Interpersonal: incurred by someone known to you
- Examples: physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- Counseling is recommended and has proven benefits

Traumatic Stress

Traumatic stress is when a traumatic experience results in fear.

- This is an emotional reaction to the trauma.

Children are at higher risk of the effects of traumatic stress because of their immature central nervous system.



How common is traumatic stress?

It has been reported⁴ that 20-30% of **parents** and 15-25% of **children** have traumatic stress that:

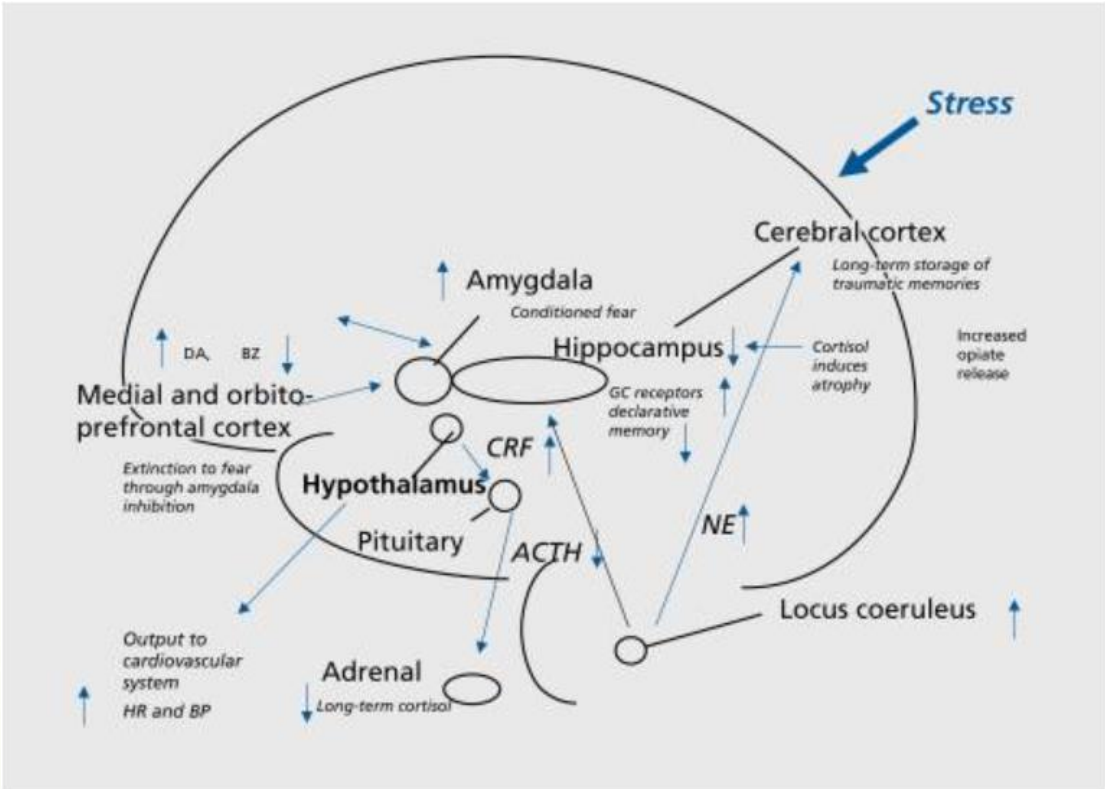
- Impairs daily function
- Impacts compliance with medical or behavioral treatment
- Impedes recovery

This impacts care!



* From National Council for Behavioral Health

Traumatic Stress: Effects on the Brain⁵



Understanding ACEs, Trauma and Behavior



3. Pathophysiology: Brain Changes from Traumatic Stress

Pathophysiology: Brain Changes from Traumatic Stress

Brain Changes

Diminished Left Brain Function

Smaller Corpus Callosum

Smaller Hippocampus by volume

The amygdala, gateway to the limbic/emotional system, becomes reactive and irritable

Temporal lobe: Disorganized Attachment

Pathophysiology: Brain Changes from Traumatic Stress

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Temporal lobe: disorganized attachment

Behavior

→ Difficulty verbalizing emotions or memories

→ Limited ability to give voice to the emotion

→ Impaired ability to process the memory and file it away

→ Volatility of emotions: anger, fear, “flashbacks” triggered

→ Difficulty with relationships, including maternal/child neglect

Diminished Left Brain Function Smaller Corpus Callosum

Behavior Changes from Traumatic Stress

1. Difficulty talking about the memory

- The connections in the brain are disrupted, making it hard to discuss the trauma



Smaller Hippocampus by Volume

Behavior Changes from Traumatic Stress

2. Decreased ability to manage the memory

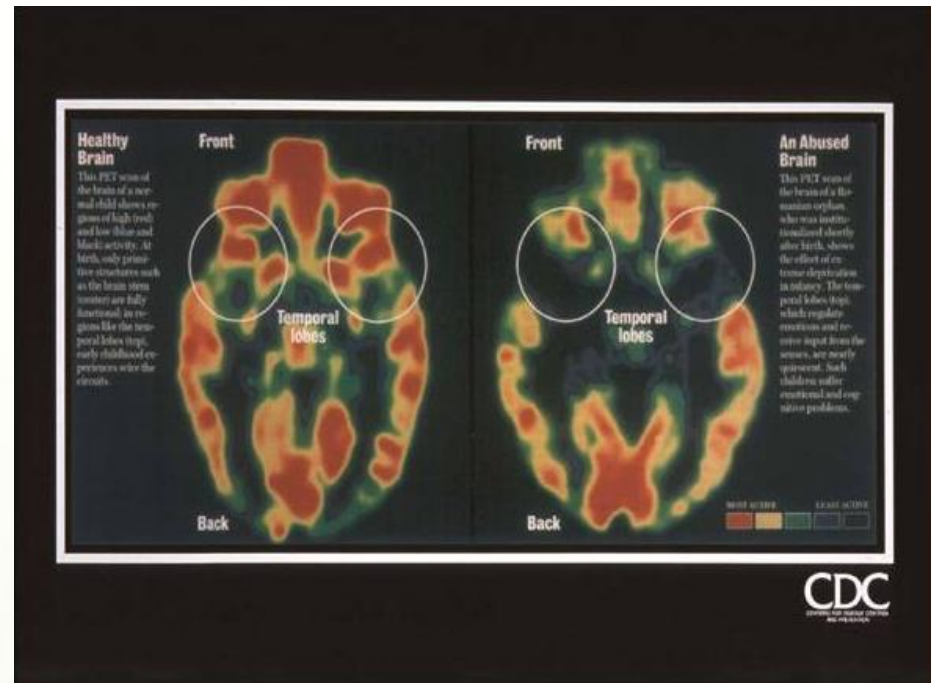
- Difficulty “filing” the memory of the trauma away into the past
- The memory stays in the present, where it can be easily triggered, causing a return of the fears



Temporal Lobe: PET scan of Neglect

Behavior Changes from Traumatic Stress

3. Attachment and Relationship Issues



The Amygdala becomes reactive and irritable

Behavior Changes from Traumatic Stress

4. The lower brain becomes overactive

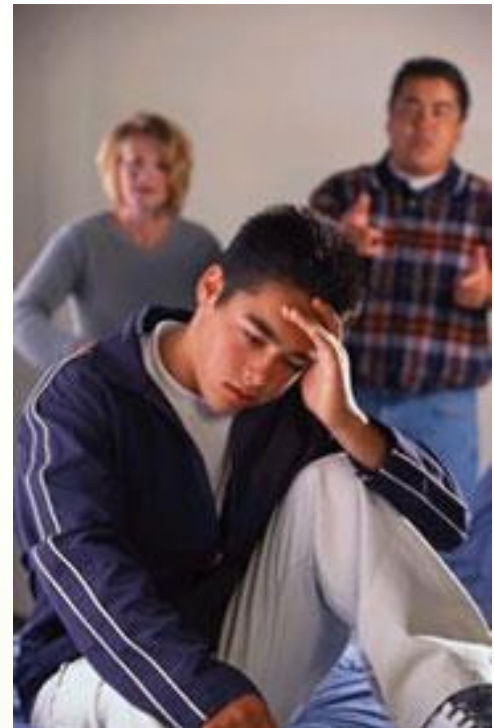
- Emotions are easily triggered
- Flashbacks of the trauma memory
- “Flipped Lids”
- Symptoms:
 - *Fight*: anger, temper
 - *Flight*: distracted, hyperactive, hypervigilant
 - *Freeze*: withdrawn, overly compliant
 - The upper brain can’t do it’s job: struggles in school



What does trauma look like in our offices, hospitals, schools?

- Distracted agitated families
- Chronically missing appointments
- Failing to follow through
- “Always angry”
- Blaming others

→ “Flipped lids”



Triggers and Trauma

Trigger: The part of a gun or bomb that, when activated, causes an explosive reaction

Psychological trigger: Something that sets off a memory or flashback transporting the person back to the event of her/his original trauma.



Triggers and Trauma

Examples of psychological triggers:

- Visual reminders of the trauma
- Witnessing trauma
- Sensory: smell or sound
- Perceived intimidation or loss of control
 - In a Medical Setting:
 - Scheduling control
 - Physical restraint
 - Complicated lingo
 - Veiled threats
 - Business office: account problems



Shameless Plug: *Become Trauma-informed*

Goals of Trauma-informed care:

- To recognize trauma
- To avoid triggering trauma
- To restore safety, strength and self-worth of the traumatized individual
- To treat all people like trauma survivors, with compassion and respect

Ask “How can I help this family” instead of “What’s wrong with this family.”

This impacts care!

