

Trauma Awareness

because recovery from trauma is possible

Children and Trauma

Is it possible for trauma to impact children even when they are young?

Absolutely - Trauma experiences can impact the identity, perception, emotions, and brain development of children and youth. Even when children are too young to develop full memories of traumatic experiences, they may experience a variety of symptoms that continue to impact their normal development. When children are exposed to violence and trauma over an extended period of time, this puts them at risk for developmental trauma - impacting the normal course of brain development and putting them at risk for a variety of negative health and mental health outcomes throughout their lives.

What do I need to know about helping children and youth?

As trauma in youth often happens in the context of relationships, it is important to know that healing needs to happen in the context of relationships as well. Children and youth need people in their lives who believe them and support them.

Children may not always be able to express themselves and what they are struggling with. They need the adults and caregivers in their lives to be aware of what to watch for (symptoms) and help them access support when they need it.

Regulating activities can be very helpful in developing ways for children to self-soothe and manage emotions. Some of these may include: use of rocking chairs, swings, jumping on a trampoline, playing a musical instrument. When they cannot talk - engage them in activity.

Responding to children

First Response

It is often difficult for a child to report trauma or abuse to someone, and it is common for them to wait before reporting (even when you encourage them to report). Therefore, the very first response to a child should include letting them know you believe them. If they are reporting something an adult did, they may worry that no one will believe them. Supporting them and letting them know you believe them will help them feel safe and secure.

How do I know my child needs help?

Young children can experience symptoms of trauma - but are often unable to identify what they are struggling with. If your child has been exposed to a traumatic event, they may have changes in emotions, behaviours, relationships, sleep, regular patterns or habits. Often times children will experience symptoms somatically - they may experience headaches, stomach aches or nightmares. If they have these symptoms and there is no medical reason, they may be impacted by stress or trauma. It is important to pay attention to these symptoms and provide opportunities to talk about feelings and what is happening for them. Children may not report trauma for fear of what may happen or a belief that it is their fault.

What is Trauma?

There are several definitions of trauma - The definition I use is broader to encompass the experiences of trauma and abuse that are often missed in diagnostic definitions. ***An actual or perceived event or experience that compromises one's physical, mental, spiritual or emotional sense of security. A traumatic experience may include a number of emotions (fear, hopelessness, horror, confusion, helplessness) and a wide variance of intensity level. A number of protective and risk factors***

along with the type of trauma, intensity of risk, and emotion around the event will influence the response one may have to an event or experience.

Did you Know ...

Most abuse of children involves someone they know?

Here are a couple of my favourite resources:

Here's a great App - Mindshift This app has numerous tools to help one manage symptoms of anxiety including information, guided meditation "chill out tools", breathing tools, symptom check list and cognitive strategies. This is a free app, and an upgraded version is available for a fee. However, the free version has plenty available and is sufficient.

Another great resource is childtrauma.org This site has great information around children's exposure to trauma and the impact of continued exposure of children to trauma. This is a great site for parents, therapists, and educators.

ABOUT ME

Throughout my work I have developed a strong passion around the area of trauma and vicarious trauma. I have worked in the field of Addiction and Mental Health in a variety of roles for 18 years, teaching a sessional class on Trauma and Healing at the University of Lethbridge for several years, along with being in private practice since 2011. I have also had the wonderful opportunity to instruct numerous workshops to a variety of professionals from one hour to two days. I continue to care for myself and my passion in this area through learning and indulging in my curiosity.

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