

## **The Many Faces of Trauma**

### **What is Trauma?**

Trauma results from a variety of distressing or disturbing events. Under normal circumstances, our nervous system helps us process upsetting experiences so that eventually we can remember them without feeling the emotional charge once attached to them.

Problems arise, however, when our nervous system becomes overwhelmed by the intensity and/or duration of the experiences. When this happens, our normal healing mechanism breaks down. Instead of naturally processing traumatic events to neutralize their emotional charge, our brain stores these negative experiences in their raw form (e.g., images, thoughts, sensations). Reminders may cause a person to relive the event with the same intensity as when it first happened. Being unable to control your own emotions and reactions can be unsettling, embarrassing, and even scary. Unprocessed experiences can make a person feel like the past is never really left behind, but rather, it continues to chase and haunt them in the present.

### **What Causes Trauma?**

Trauma is often a result of several factors. The nature or type of event(s), previous experiences with traumatic events, and the support (or lack of) received afterwards all play a part. Post-trauma symptoms are not always linked to a single event, often called a “big T-trauma” event, like an accident or a violent attack. The symptoms can arise from many upsetting “little t-trauma” events over time. Sometimes, the cumulative impact of these events may not be evident for several years. “Little t-traumas” include, but are not limited to, workplace abuse, bullying, multiple minor accidents, complicated grief, divorce, or chronic high conflict situations.

### **What are the Symptoms?**

Post-trauma symptoms may not present immediately after the event. Sometimes it takes several months to years for symptoms to appear or for a person to recognize the symptoms. A person may experience intrusive and recurring images or thoughts of the event(s), vivid nightmares, or flashbacks. They may feel always “on edge” and find it difficult to relax, concentrate, or make decisions. They may constantly feel like something bad is about to happen again despite logically knowing they are now safe. They may be stuck in feelings of horror, shame, disgust, sadness, fear, and anger. They may find it difficult to enjoy life or experience any pleasant emotions, becoming overpowered by negative thoughts about themselves, other people, or the world. Reckless or destructive behavior may occur, and traumatized people may feel like they are in a dream or that things no longer seem real. These symptoms may be so strong that they disrupt a person’s ability to work or relate with friends and family.

Prolonged stress can have serious negative consequences at the neurochemical and hormonal level, leading to the development of physiological symptoms. These symptoms include elevated heart rate and blood pressure, disrupted sleep, panic attacks, becoming easily startled, headaches, muscle tension or pain, sweats or chills, and gastrointestinal problems. People may find they are unable to remember key details of the trauma and report increased daily forgetfulness. To cope, people may avoid any reminders of the event(s). They may avoid thinking or talking about the



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event or avoid places or people associated with the event (e.g., they may not return to work or school if that is where the event occurred). There may be an increased use of alcohol or drugs as an attempt to forget or dull the feelings of distress.

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

A formal diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) often involves a person experiencing a distressing event involving death or threat of death, serious injury, or violence. The event can be experienced directly or indirectly (e.g., witnessing, hearing about, or assisting others). Many people associate PTSD with a car accident, a traumatic death of a loved one, natural disaster, or sexual or physical assaults. However, the effects of trauma can also result from experiences not always perceived to be traumatic, such as sudden job loss or bankruptcy, chronic ridicule, workplace bullying, and neglect during childhood. Such events may leave people feeling helpless, unsafe, weak, and powerless. It is not so much *what* happens to a person but *how* it impacts them.

### **Complex Trauma**

Complex trauma is different from PTSD. Complex trauma results from the cumulative impact of adverse experiences during childhood. It can result from abuse (emotional, physical, mental, and/or sexual abuse, and neglect), lack of caregiver warmth or support, absent or dismissive caregiving, abandonment, multiple changes in caregivers, and repeated medical or surgical procedures. These adverse experiences impact the emotional, physical, cognitive, and neurological development of children. Complex trauma shapes how children think about themselves (self-concept), how they respond to other experiences in their lives (emotional regulation and coping skills), their ability to focus and learn (educational skills) and their ability to trust others (relationship skills).

### **Is Trauma Treatable?**

Yes! Although memories will stay, trauma treatment can reduce the “emotional charge” of these memories using non-invasive strategies that facilitate the body’s natural healing processes. It is possible to make distressing memories just a part of one’s life story, so they are no longer *the* story of one’s life. Like PTSD, complex trauma is treatable, but it often requires a different approach and a more comprehensive treatment plan.

By tailoring treatment strategies to your specific needs, we can help you to:

- Reduce the emotional charge of memories
- Retrain your body to work for you, not against you
- Learn healthy ways of coping
- Gain a new perspective on what happened to you and change what it means for you
- Learn how to talk about and explain your experiences to loved ones (if you choose to do so)
- Learn how to end the pain in your life without having to end your life
- Move on and live your life, rather than just survive

### **Next Steps**

If you have any questions, please call us to speak with one of our trauma specialists. We can help you decide if trauma treatment may be a good fit for you (Tel: **780-710-9567**).