

Developmental Aspects of Childhood Trauma Contributing to Adult Revictimization

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1. The idea that our past experiences contribute to present and future experiences is not unusual. To a large extent, we are where we've been. For survivors of childhood abuse, this concept can be terrifying. For survivors of childhood abuse and subsequent adult domestic violence, this concept can seem like blame. However, understanding the ways in which the past can infiltrate the present is essential to empowering victims of abuse. It has less to do with assigning blame, and more to do with gaining control.

To explore this issue further, consider some markers of an abusive environment.

Totalitarian control - enforced by violence, death threats, and random reinforcement of petty rules

Pervasive terror - fear for their own life, fear of a loved one's death

Isolation - often intentional destruction or prevention of potentially supportive relationships (Herman, 1992)

Abusive environments mimic environments of torture and mind control as reported by American POWs. Growing up under the iron fist of coercion and abuse has profound effects on survivors. As Judith Herman says "The personality formed in an environment of coercive control is not well adapted to adult life."

Persons who are routinely exposed to violence and abuse in childhood are likely to experience severe disruption in all significant developmental spheres. The child may develop patterns of coping which solve immediate problems but contribute to long-term difficulty in relating to him/herself and others. These patterns are based on the primary goal of survival.

How does a child survive trauma at the hands of caregivers? S/he adapts in several ways.

Vigilance increases in an effort to be able to predict danger.

S/he works to avoid abuse by hiding (in closets, in the woods etc.), running away, and trying to appear as unnoticeable as possible. However, avoidance usually doesn't work, and if the child is caught later, s/he is sure to suffer more because of the efforts at self-protection.

When avoidance fails, children will try to gain some control by trying to appease or be "good enough" to please the abuser. However, since the abuse rarely has anything to do with the child per se, the abuser is likely to continue on the intended path regardless of the child's behavior.

In an environment where parental power is exercised arbitrarily, rules are inconsistent and the abuse is unpredictable, many children adopt a position of complete surrender (Herman, 1992). This surrender is carefully constructed in the mind of the child. S/he may understand it as something else altogether. Most survivors would balk at the notion of surrender, as if it is a giving in. Clearly, surrender in this sense refers to a self-protective

state that is most likely to ensure survival.

The child may create a fantasy world where nothing bad ever happens. S/he may dissociate and let another part split off to compartmentalize awareness of the trauma.

S/he may unconsciously, disconnect the internal mechanisms that facilitate awareness of danger. When these fight or flight mechanisms are constantly activated to no avail, they may be ignored over time. Most survivors learn to shut down awareness of emotions to protect themselves from overwhelming emotional pain and betrayal.

It is the last two mechanisms that contribute most to adult revictimization. When a survivor has to constrict awareness of danger and access to emotions in order to survive, s/he essentially disables self-protective mechanisms. A person who is trapped in a burning building and sees the smoke and flames does not need the ringing of a smoke alarm to know s/he is in danger. However, if that person survives the fire and returns to the building later, the smoke alarm becomes an important source of information about safety once again.

With emotions and awareness of danger disabled in the service of survival, the now-grown survivor is lacking crucial tools that are necessary in adult relationships. S/he cannot access feelings that tell how s/he is doing in relation to someone else, therefore, s/he may become involved with dangerous people without realizing it. Perpetrators may in fact, search out people with these vulnerabilities.

The common result is a repetition of an abusive relationship. "Repetition is the mute language of the abused" (Richard Rhodes). The adult survivor may be prone to patterns of intense, unstable relationships repeatedly enacting dramas of rescue, injustice and betrayal. Repeated abuse is seen as the inevitable consequence of having a relationship,

We as clinicians and helpers serve survivors best when we are willing to help them understand themselves in the context of their histories. Self-awareness is the key to recovery and healing. Yet self-awareness is a two-edged sword for survivors. It puts them in touch with intense emotion and batters against the defenses of avoidance. The challenge for helpers and survivors is to work together to face the facts and feelings in a more integrated fashion. Self-awareness increases self-control and healthy responsibility. These in turn, lead to empowerment. Empowerment is the key to ending cycles of revictimization