

# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

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Many overwhelming experiences can have a traumatic effect. However, not everyone who goes through a life-threatening event or severe crisis situation experiences ongoing traumatic stress responses. The impact of any single event or the accumulative impact of events is contingent on many different variables. Also, symptoms occurring after traumatic events can express themselves in a variety of different ways and intensities. For example:

- Two people are in the same car accident and both sustain minor injuries. Three months later one person still feels extremely anxious approaching their car and asks their partner to drive. The other person who was in the car accident has no particularly strong feelings about the accident and drives all the time. To the first person the experience was traumatic; to the second it was nothing more than a bad experience.
- Three 17-year-old boys are out fishing together in early spring. One of the friends falls overboard when trying to start the motor. The other two friends try to help him before he gets swept downriver. Later, the body of the boy is found; he died by drowning. One of the remaining friends is traumatized: he uses drugs to cope, drops out of school and struggles with maintaining employment and relationships. The other friend struggles emotionally for a short while after the accident, but goes on to complete university, gets married and pursues a career.
- In a family of four children, two girls and two boys, the girls and one of the boys have been repeatedly sexually abused by their stepfather. Later, one of the abused girls turns to alcohol and has many short-term sexual relationships with abusive men. The other daughter has a committed loving relationship, has three children and a stable family. The abused boy struggles to maintain intimate relationships and is a successful electrician. The fourth child, who was not sexually abused, is in his teens and struggles to finish school and maintain employment. Each child has their own specific *cluster of effects* from the abuse.

## **Brief Definition of Trauma**

Trauma is a wound that injures us emotionally, psychologically and physiologically. Trauma occurs when a person experiences a threat, including sexual violence, to physical and/or psychological survival of oneself or a close family member or friend. We each have innate capabilities to respond to such situations and return to a state of equilibrium. However if the intensity of the situation overwhelms our resilience, often with intense helplessness, shame or terror, and we are not able to re-establish a sense of relative safety, our built-in survival mechanisms remain on high alert continually responding to threat; thus, we become *traumatized*.

## Types of Trauma

Many experiences can contribute to or cause a person to experience trauma. However, it is not the event itself that is a *trauma*. It is the nature of the sustained injury.

### Developmental Trauma

- Developmental trauma occurs when a child is exposed to adverse conditions in their environment (such as abuse, neglect or instability) and optimal development of the child's nervous system is interrupted. Experiences of developmental trauma can make a person more vulnerable to later experiences of trauma. *Examples:*
  - Alcoholic, chaotic home environment
  - Emotional or physical neglect
  - Family violence: physical, sexual or emotional
  - Systemic oppression, racism (e.g., in residential schools), discrimination

### Shock Trauma

- Shock trauma occurs when a person has a shock reaction to a traumatic event. It usually involves high levels of activation from the nervous system as the person reacts from deep, primitive instincts.
- Often the event(s) are very sudden and/or extremely severe; however, not always. For example, medical procedures can be planned and still have a traumatic effect.
- Traumatic loss is another distinct form of shock trauma. *Examples:*
  - Surgeries, dental procedures
  - Motor vehicle accidents, falls, plane crashes (or near misses)
  - Natural disasters, e.g.: earthquakes, flood, fires, hurricanes
  - Stillbirth, miscarriages, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)
  - Tragic death of any loved one; terminal illness diagnosis

### Relational Trauma

- An experience of threat from another person adds a layer of violation and disruption. The impact is especially complicated if the source of the threat is someone in a position of trust or supposed to be in the safe realm for the individual.
  - War, terrorism, genocide, political conflicts
  - Bullying, violence, robbery, physical or sexual assault
  - Domestic violence, abuse in the family

A person need only perceive an event to be threatening for their nervous system to react *fully* in a survival manner. Unresolved trauma leaves a person more vulnerable to experience trauma with later events.