

TRAUMA and HOMELESSNESS WORKSHOP

 TORONTO Canada

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Introduction to Trauma

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GOALS

- To define the notion of *psychological trauma*
- To look at some causes of trauma
- To see how it shows up in the lives of traumatized people
- To provide a lens for understanding the clients we work with
- To recognize signs of vicarious trauma in ourselves

A Working Definition

- Simply put, **trauma** is . . .
 - the **overwhelming impact**
of a **perceived threat** to one's **life** or **well-being**,
or to one's **physical** and **emotional integrity**
or that of a loved one,
 - which may **continue** to **manifest itself** in various
ways
and
➤ **intrude** on daily life.

Another Definition (with a focus on impact)

“In its broadest definition, a **trauma** is an experience that **causes one to develop erroneous beliefs about oneself or the world** and to **behave in ways that are not skillful**.

For example, a child who is abused may come to believe she is bad and the world isn't safe. She may have difficulty in intimate relationships. These experiences also **become fixed in the body-mind** in the form of **irrational emotions, blocked energy, and physical symptoms.**”

(Parnell, 2077, p. 3)

Traumatic events can be

- one-time occurrences
(often with long-lasting effects)
e.g., natural disaster, terrorist attack, major loss
- repeated events over a period of time
e.g., domestic violence, ongoing childhood sexual abuse
- events layered on one another



cumulative effect

Things Ended

*Engulfed by fear and suspicion,
mind agitated, eyes alarmed,
we try desperately to invent ways out,
plan how to avoid
the obvious danger that threatens us so terribly.
Yet we're mistaken, that's not the danger ahead:
the news was wrong
(or we didn't hear it, or didn't get it right).
Another disaster, one we never imagined,
suddenly, violently, descends upon us,
and finding us unprepared—there's no time now—
sweeps us away.*

— C. P. Cavafy, 1911

“Big T” trauma

and

“Little t” trauma

“Big T” trauma

- Events that severely threaten life, safety, or well-being, such as
 - natural disasters
 - combat
 - accidents
 - major illness
 - loss of a loved one
 - experiencing or *witnessing* violence
 - loss of home or secure living environment

possibly



PTSD or other stress disorder

Adapted from Francine Shapiro

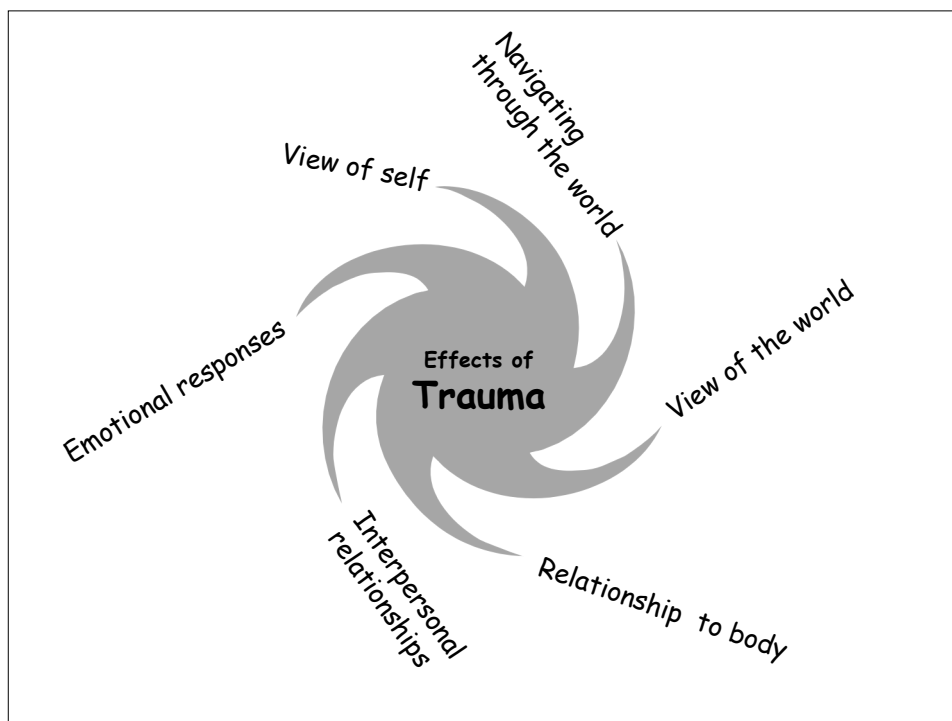
“Little t” trauma

- Events that make us feel unsafe, unloved, without control, and without hope
 - humiliations
 - failures
 - losses
- Particularly in childhood, “little t” traumatic events might include
 - being bullied
 - being excluded
 - being unjustly chided or punished
 - falling off a bicycle

Adapted from Francine Shapiro

HOMELESSNESS: A Traumatic Experience

- Losing one's home or not having a secure place to live = a traumatic experience.
- Homelessness is most often preceded by one or more *other* traumatic events — sometimes throughout a lifetime.
- People are often retraumatized while homeless — on the streets, in shelters, or in other transitional environments.
- The effects are **cumulative** and may result in **complex trauma**.



Trauma Responses

- Distressing and overwhelming feelings
 - Feeling “crazy” due to unfamiliar thoughts and sensations, and loss of control over one’s environment
 - Feeling numb and disconnected from feelings
- Trauma responses are ***normal responses*** to ***abnormal events***.

Responses to Trauma: Clusters of Trauma Symptoms

1. Hyperarousal
2. Intrusion/Re-experiencing
3. Constriction/Avoidance

(Herman, 1997)

1. Hyperarousal

- on perpetual alert
- easy startle response
- irritable reactions to small provocations
- anxiety and/or panic
- poor sleep

(Based on Herman, 1997, p. 35)

2. Intrusion/Re-experiencing

- Flashbacks
 - Reliving the event as though it were in the present.
- Nightmares
- Triggers
 - Memories of the original event are easily provoked by minor cues or events in daily life with intense vividness and emotional response.
 - This can make even clearly safe environments *feel* very unsafe.
- Racing thoughts

(Based on Herman, 1997, p. 37)

3. Constriction/Avoidance

- Feeling numb
 - ❖ detached from emotions
 - ❖ detached from bodily sensations
- Seeking to feel numb, escape, or displace unbearable feelings through
 - ❖ substance use
 - ❖ self-harm
 - ❖ eating disorders
 - ❖ sexual “acting out”
- Dissociation
 - ❖ “drifting off”
 - ❖ entering a hypnotic or dream-like state
 - ❖ losing sense of self
 - ❖ splitting parts of self

ENCODING OF TRAUMATIC EVENTS

“The traumatic memory becomes associated with emotions and the body

— in **implicit, non-declarative** memory,
not in **explicit, narrative** memory, where
they can be recalled without pain.”

(Shapiro, p. *xiv*)

ENCODING OF TRAUMATIC EVENTS

“Where explicit memory depends on language, **implicit memory bypasses it**. Explicit memory involves facts, descriptions, and operations that are based on thought; implicit memory involves procedures and internal states that are automatic. It operates unconsciously, unless made conscious through a **bridging** to explicit memory that narrates or makes sense of the remembered operation, emotion, sensation, etc.”

(Rothschild, 2000, p. 30)

ENCODING OF TRAUMATIC EVENTS

And trauma is stored in somatic memory.

— In other words, **the body remembers!**

(Rothschild, 2000, chapter 3)

This afternoon's workshop . . .

- Recovering and rebuilding
- Practical tools for fostering safety and stability
- Ways of preventing or dealing with your own vicarious trauma