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Hidden scars: ten facts about complex trauma



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1. Complex trauma is a form of psychological trauma, inflicted by caregivers, which occurs during the developmental years, a period when the brain is still in its formative stages, absorbing experiences which shape neural pathways and influence lifelong behaviors and responses.

2. During this critical period, the brain is exceptionally malleable to allow it to adapt to whichever environment it encounters. If the brain is marinated in trauma during this time, survival instincts which lead to a fight or flight response are magnified. In the presence of trauma, these adaptive pathways become maladaptive; the brain prioritising survival mechanisms over healthy developmental processes.

3. Childhood interpersonal trauma, perpetrated by caregivers who do not provide the expected safety and nurturance, can manifest in various forms – neglect, domestic violence, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. For children raised in these hostile environments, each day may bring repeated encounters with life-threatening situations, saturating their developing brains with stress and fear.

4. The consequences of such early-life trauma are profound and enduring.

4.1 The formation of the "self" becomes distorted, resulting in a fragmented sense of identity shaped by overwhelming negative experiences.

4.2 Emotion regulation becomes challenging, leading to difficulties in managing and expressing feelings. This is what is colloquially known as having "anger" issues.

4.3 Learning and cognitive development are hindered, impacting intellectual growth and academic achievement.

5. Moreover, the psychological toll of complex trauma extends into the childhood and beyond. The mental health is affected for life, predisposing one to mental illness. Individuals may experience impulsivity, aggression, anxiety, and depression, often accompanied by an increased risk of developing personality disorders, dissociation, and somatic symptom disorders.

6. Additionally, the "wear and tear" on the body from prolonged stress can lead to chronic illnesses such as hypertension, coronary artery disease, inflammation and pain syndromes, auto-immune diseases, neoplasia and ultimately shorten the lifespan.

7. Importantly, the safety one experienced during childhood serves as a predictor of one's vulnerability to complex trauma syndrome. "How safe was your childhood" is the screening question asked in a large study which revealed how common complex trauma actually is.

8. Those who grew up in nurturing and safe early social environments are less likely to face the long-term consequences of early-life adversity.

9. High levels of the stress hormone cortisol can affect the unborn child of a mother whose pregnancy occurs during a period when her safety is compromised, predisposing to irritability/ difficult temperament and difficulties with the mother-child bond or attachment of the child after birth.

10. In conclusion, understanding complex trauma is essential for providing effective interventions and support to those who have endured such experiences. By recognising the profound impact of early-life trauma on the developing brain and subsequent psychological functioning, we can work towards promoting healing, resilience, and a path towards reclaiming agency over one's life.

