

Practitioner Briefing - The impact of Trauma

Welcome, to this Practitioner Briefing which aims to help practitioners and their managers understand the importance and impact of trauma for children and their families. The messages in this briefing are just as important for those practitioners working with adults who are parents.

A definition of Trauma - psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience, often involving a sense of intense fear, terror, and helplessness (Perry,2006). What is deemed as traumatic can vary from person to person. This also includes Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) which refers to traumatic experiences which can have lasting effects into adulthood, such as physical, sexual, emotional abuse, exposure to domestic abuse and/or living with someone with substance abuse. **Types of Trauma** - **Type 1** – a single incident trauma, e.g. a car accident, natural disaster and sometimes assault. It is an event that happens one time and may be considered an exceptional circumstance. **Type 2** - multiple traumas, usually involving prolonged, repeated exposure. **Type 3** - multiple traumas from an early age over a lengthy period.

Trauma Symptoms

Dissociation - This involves distancing or shutting down to cope. This can look like spacing out, a glazed overlook or taking a while to respond. **Derealisation** – An individual may feel as though the world around them is not real or it is lifeless. **Flashbacks** - These are sudden, uncontrollable sensory memories that make it seem like the trauma is reoccurring. **Hypervigilance**- This includes exploring others faces for sign of disapproval. The individuals' regulatory systems prime the body to always stay on full alert. **PTSD** - Is often a combination of intrusive flashbacks and dissociation. **Stress** is a natural physical and mental reaction to life experiences. However, if your stress response does not stop firing, and these stress levels stay elevated far longer than is necessary for survival, it can take a toll on your health. Chronic (Toxic) stress can cause a variety of symptoms and health concerns. Chronic or toxic stress can be a side effect of a traumatic incident or long-term exposure to trauma through abuse, chronic neglect, or lack of safety. Without safe environments or safe relationships our bodies may remain on high alert which in turn may cause chronic or toxic stress.

Impact on the body

Adrenaline when someone is startled, frightened, angry, or scared their body produces the hormone adrenaline which can give them strength to protect themselves from danger - flight, fight, freeze response. Adrenaline is responsible for the following physical symptoms under stress: shallow breathing, heart pounding, profuse sweating, intestines shut down, tense, apprehensiveness, and jitters. Should the brain remain in a state of high alert from danger, Adrenaline remains within the body which can impact their physical health. **Cardiovascular** - higher cholesterol, high blood pressure, increased risk of heart attack and stroke. **Joints and Muscles** - increased inflammation, tension, aches and pains, muscle tightness. **Immune System** - decreased immune function and defences, increased risk of becoming ill, increase in recovery time. **Physical appearance** - dry skin, delayed tissue repair, hair loss, dull brittle hair, brittle nails. **Gut** - bowel issues, indigestion, bloating, pain, and discomfort. **Reproduction system** - decreased hormone production, decrease in libido.

The Impact of trauma on a child's brain development and functioning.

Trauma in early childhood can have a severe impact through the course of someone's life.

'Evidence suggests that at least half of the population have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience in their lifetime.' (Bellis et al,2015). Research has shown that unresolved trauma can increase risks later in adult life and not responding to harms in early adulthood may mean that individuals will require more complex support later. Trauma informed practice seeks to look beyond a person's presenting behaviours and instead asks 'What does this person need?' Increasing practitioner's awareness of how trauma can negatively affect a child's abilities to develop trusting relationships with health and care services. Rather than treating trauma-related difficulties, trauma informed practice seeks to remove barriers. Including fear, lack of choice and loss of control caused by traumatic experiences. It aims to increase service accessibility through culturally sensitive, safe services that people trust. Whilst also preparing practitioners to work in partnership with the child and empower them to make choices for their own wellbeing (Fallot and Harris 2009)

A Persistent Fear Response - The chronic stress of repeated trauma can produce several biological reactions such as a persistent state of fear. This adaptation, while beneficial in a hostile world, can become a routine of life that is hard to change, even if a child's surroundings improve. A generalised fear response can lay the foundation for future chronic stress and anxiety disorders such as PTSD. **Hyperarousal** - When a child's developing brain experiences chronic, traumatic stress, neuro pathways for the fear responses become routine and create memories that trigger fear without conscious thought. Children can become sensitive to non-verbal cues, such as eye contact or touch and are more apt to misinterpret them. **Increased Internalising Symptoms** - Chronic trauma can lead to chemical and structural changes in the brain affecting the regulation of emotions and stress. Abuse and neglect can affect the connection between the Amygdala and Hippocampus which can initiate development of depression and anxiety in adolescence. **Delayed Development Milestones** - Failure to meet a child's cognitive, emotional, or social needs constitutes as neglect. Lack of stimulation during early years can lead to weak neuro pathways, inhibiting a child's ability to achieve developmental milestones. **Complicated Social Interactions** - Toxic stress can hinder brain development in such a way that makes engaging with others in social settings feel uncomfortable and daunting and trigger a negative response. **Unexpected Response to positive feedback** - Children that experience traumatic stress are maybe less responsive to positive stimuli - ambivalence or aggression may be observed as a response to praise. **Diminished Executive Functioning** - Executive functioning typically includes three distinct features: working memory, inhibitory control (filtering of thoughts and impulses) and cognitive flexibility (adjusting to demands). At an early age, trauma and chronic stress can cause deficits in executive functioning such as lower academic achievement, intellectual deterioration, and short attention span.

Key Principles of Trauma Informed Practice.

Relationships are key in enabling recovery for those who have experienced trauma. Practitioners should focus on: **Safety**: Including physical, psychological, and emotional safety. Recognise their perspective and validate their feelings. How can they make the environment less intimidating to avoid re-traumatisation? **Choice**: Ensuring children have a voice in the decision-making progress and listening to their needs and wishes. **Trustworthiness**: Practitioners explain what they are doing and why and do what they say they will do. Being consistent and predictable in communication can reduce a child's anxiety. **Collaboration**: It is important to foster a culture of 'doing with' children. However, where there may be legal restrictions that prevent this, it is important to discuss and explain to the child. **Empowerment**: Focus on the child's strengths supporting them to take control of their lives, giving children a voice. Focus on what can be done whilst also having room for difficulties to be heard and support put in place when needed. **Cultural Consideration**: Asking children about their cultural values, beliefs, and experiences to understand how this might influence their experience of contact with services.

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