

What is Trauma?

Trauma can arise from deeply distressing or frightening situations- usually events that are outside what is “normal” human experience- during which a person’s capacity to cope with threat is completely overwhelmed.

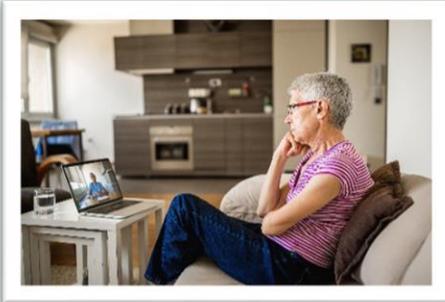
People react differently to potentially traumatic experiences- some might experience trauma response reactions straight away, or much later after the event. Most recover well with the help of family and friends and find that the internal responses to traumatic situations subside over time (days or weeks). A minority of people will develop more serious and lasting impacts (months or years) such as depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, anxiety, or drug and alcohol problems (as a way of dealing with the symptoms).

Why the difference? Factors include: the nature of the event, the level of support available, people’s response to their distress, previous or current life stress, cumulative experiences of trauma, coping resources and personality factors. Bruce Perry (2003) says ‘the more outside the range of the normal experience and the more life-threatening the experience, the more difficult it will be for the normal mental mechanisms to work efficiently to process and master that experience’ (p. 5).



What is Complex Trauma?

Traumatic events which occur in early development can alter a child’s developmental trajectory and is referred to as complex trauma. Complex trauma describes both children’s exposure to multiple traumatic events—often of an invasive, interpersonal nature such as abuse and/or neglect—and the wide-ranging, long-term effects of this exposure particularly on the formation of the child’s capacity for self-regulation, their sense of self and framework for relationships. Without effective intervention, complex trauma can continue to compromise a person’s health and wellbeing across the lifespan. Early childhood trauma is more pervasively harmful and difficult to treat than other types of trauma.



As a result of traumatic events, what can happen inside people is that they can get disconnected from their emotions, disconnected from their body, have difficulty being in the present moment, can develop a negative view of the world and self, and a defensive view of others.

How do you transcend these manifestations of trauma that keep emerging in the present moment?

By reconnecting with yourself, by restoring your connection with your body primarily and your emotions that you lost. Once you do, then you have what we call recovery. Because what does it mean to recover something? It means to find something again. People find themselves... and the loss of self is the essence of trauma.

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Describing Trauma:

Trauma affects people in multiple ways: physically, emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively. Symptoms include:

Physical: Excessive alertness (looking for signs of danger), fatigue/exhaustion, body pains, disturbed sleep, easily startled, restless and always on the move, or appearing lifeless.

Emotional: feeling numb/detached, anxiety, panic, guilt, anger, irritability, fearful, depressed.

Behavioral: avoiding places/activities/people who remind them of the event/s, loss of interest in normal activities/routines, social withdrawal/isolation.

Cognitive: dissociation, intrusive thoughts, visual images, and memories; nightmares, trouble concentrating, poor memory, poor impulse control, diminished complex thinking capacity, disorientation, and confusion.

In addition to these symptoms, people who have experienced **complex trauma** are prone to experiencing poor self-esteem, such as feelings of worthlessness and chronic shame. Adults who did not experience healthy attachments have been shown to be more vulnerable to stress. They can have trouble controlling and expressing emotions, and may react violently or inappropriately to situations, having limited insight into and language for various emotional states. Adults with a complex trauma history may have problems forming trusting relationships and relating with authority figures. Complexly traumatized adults frequently suffer from body dysregulation, meaning they over-respond or under-respond to sensory stimuli. E.g., they may injure themselves without feeling pain, suffer from physical problems without being aware of them, or the opposite – they may complain of chronic pain in various body areas for which no physical cause can be found.



FACTSHEET: TRAUMA & OLDER PEOPLE

'It is common for older adults to minimize and deny the pain they experience from past traumas. They're more likely to try to cope with these issues by themselves instead of seeking mental health treatment. However, strategies that once seemed to help with trauma symptoms can be more difficult to maintain as people get older'

Dr Elissa McCarthy (Clinical Psychologist at National Centre for PTSD) & Dr. Joan Cook (Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Yale School of Medicine)

New challenges appear with age, some which can make the symptoms of trauma more noticeable, come back, or even to occur for the first time. Sometimes people assume that this is just a part of ageing that they must live with, but **people are never too old to get help** to maximise their wellbeing. Remember that **the impacts of trauma**, whether it occurred decades ago or yesterday, **can be addressed at any age**.



Symptoms may worsen as people age causing behavioural changes. This is normal and treatment can help. Some tips:

- Take time to understand the person's experience and how it affects them.
- Learn about trauma and recovery
- Be non-judgemental and supportive, listen to their story and thank them for sharing.
- Connect them with help.
- Get support/de-briefing for yourself.
- Give hope- they have survived this far; they can get through this!

CHALLENGES & STRATEGIES

for Older People Living with Trauma

- **CHALLENGE:** More free time which can make unpleasant memories/physiological symptoms more frequent.
STRATEGY: Create structure and routines which bring a sense of daily rhythm and connection. Create opportunities for people to develop skills and hobbies e.g., create a library/book club, scrapbooking area, skills sharing workshops, music lessons, puzzles, movement etc.
- **CHALLENGE:** Loss of purpose and sense of identity.
STRATEGY: Give opportunity to learn new skills (i.e., WEA college, volunteer program, interest groups, online courses, charity work such as knitting for homeless).
- **CHALLENGE:** Loss of loved ones.
STRATEGY: Assist people to maintain relationships with important people and form new friendships, too. For example, ensuring that people have the means to connect with family (i.e., video calls), form reminiscence groups and create opportunities for people to belong (i.e., church groups).
- **CHALLENGE:** Changes in physical ability.
STRATEGY: Replace hobbies with other similar activities. For example, if poor eyesight makes reading difficult, try audiobooks or podcasts instead. Create a potted garden at a higher level.
- **CHALLENGE:** Medical problems. Living with untreated trauma can make other mental and physical health issues worse.
STRATEGY: Encourage people to be proactive in managing health conditions and get treatment for trauma symptoms, experiencing trauma symptoms are not just 'part of ageing'.