The Impact of Trauma on Learning and Behavior in Children and Teens

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Outline

- What is trauma?
- Fear response
- Symptoms of traumatic stress
- Trauma triggers
- Traumatic stress across development
- Trauma and learning
- Trauma and ADHD
- Ways to help
What Is Trauma?

- Actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence
- Direct exposure
- Witnessing exposure
- Learning about loved ones’ exposure
Examples of Trauma
Homelessness

- Trauma prior to homelessness
  - Child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, community violence

- Trauma during homelessness
  - Loss of home, safety, sense of security, family separations, abrupt and unpredictable life changes
Fear Response
Fear Response

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze
Fear Learning
Fear Response in Children
Fear Response in Children

- **FIGHT**
- **FLIGHT**
- **FREEZE**
Fight Response

- Yelling and tantrums
- Swearing
- Hitting or fighting
- Throwing things or damaging property
- Hyperactivity
- Hypervigilance
Flight Response

- Withdrawing (e.g., isolating, hiding)
- Not responding to others
- Running away from others
- Developmental regression
Freeze Response

- Spacing out
- Difficulty concentrating or paying attention
- Increased sleep
Adaptive Fear Response

- Return to baseline
- Threat
- Assess danger
- Very dangerous!

Respond according to danger
Maladaptive Fear Response

Return to baseline

Assess danger

Respond according to danger

Very dangerous!
Trauma Triggers
Trauma Triggers
Common Trauma Triggers

- Loud noises
- Anniversaries
- Hand/body gestures
- Fighting
- Confusion/chaos
- Transition/change in routine
- Feelings of fear, anger, anxiety, or sadness
- Physical touch
- Emergency vehicles
- Certain smells
- Separation from caregivers
- Loss of things, people, home, etc.
Maladaptive Fear Response

- Threat
- Assess danger
- Not very dangerous.
- Respond according to danger
- Return to baseline
Maladaptive Fear Response

- Threat
- Assess danger
- Respond according to danger
- Maintain fear response

Very dangerous!
Symptoms of Traumatic Stress

- Intrusion
- Avoidance
- Negative thoughts/mood
- Hyper-arousal
Traumatic Stress in Preschoolers

- Separation anxiety
- Regression or delays
- Recreating the event
- Sleep difficulties
- Changes in behavior
- Over- or under-reactivity
- Increased distress
- Anxiety about safety
- New fears
- Preoccupation with death

Traumatic Stress in School-Aged Children

- Increased activity
- Decreased attention
- Withdrawal
- Anger/aggression
- Absenteeism
- Mistrust
- Change in social behavior
- Difficulty with authority
- Somatic complaints
- Changes in school performance
- Core symptoms of PTSD

Traumatic Stress in Middle School Students

- Irritability with friends, teachers, or events
- Discomfort with feelings
- Repeated discussion of trauma

Traumatic Stress in High School Students

- Increase in impulsivity/risk-taking
- Increased risk for substance use
- Negative impact on trust or perception of others
- Heightened difficulty with authority, redirection, or criticism

Trauma and Learning

- Intrusive thoughts
- Concentration and memory
- Jumpiness
- Interrupted sleep/nightmares
- Anger/moodiness
- Social withdrawal
Chronic Trauma and Learning

- Chronic trauma exposure can impact brain development
  - Long-term effects on attention, memory, and cognition
  - Difficulty focusing, organizing, and processing information
  - Challenges with effective problem-solving/planning
  - Increase feelings of frustration and anxiety
Trauma vs. ADHD

Difficulty with learning and concentration

Easily distracted

Often doesn’t seem to listen

Disorganized

Hyperactive

Restless

Difficulty sleeping

ADHD Only

- Difficulty sustaining attention
- Struggling to follow instructions
- Difficulty waiting or taking turns
- Talking excessively
- Losing important things
- Interrupting or intruding upon others

How to Support Youth

- Maintain routines
- Give choices
- Increase support/encouragement
- Set clear limits with logical consequences
- Be sensitive to trauma triggers
- Consider learning accommodations
How to Support Youth

- Anticipate difficult times and provide additional support
- Warn children about anything out of the ordinary
- Avoid provocation and power struggles
- Model prosocial behavior
- Maintain clear boundaries
- Remain respectful and nonjudgmental
When To Get Help

- Following reporting procedures if you suspect abuse
- Contact your supervisor if applicable
- Refer to community resources when a child shows signs of being unable to cope with traumatic stress
Resilience

Galatzer-Levy, Huang, & Bonanno, 2018
Compassion Fatigue and Secondary Traumatic Stress

- Irritability and impatience
- Difficulty planning
- Decreased concentration
- Feeling numb, detached, or denying the impact of trauma
- Intense intrusive thoughts about students’ trauma
- Dreams about students’ trauma
Self-Care

- Teamwork and social support
- Seek help with personal trauma
- Spend time with children who are not experiencing traumatic stress
- Take breaks
- Allow yourself to cry
- Engage in healthy and pleasurable activities
- Take time to self-reflect
Resources

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN; www.nctsn.org)
  - Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators
  - Resources for Working with Homeless Youth

- SAMHSA Homelessness Programs and Resources (www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources)