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## How to heal from childhood trauma

Healing childhood trauma is a life-long process – one that involves a myriad of treatments that attempt to heal the mind, body, nervous system, and of course, the emotional and physical symptoms related to trauma. Traumatic events Childhood trauma is a result of ongoing or singular traumatic events that occur in ones’ early life. Types of childhood trauma involve (but are not limited to): Psychological trauma Physical or sexual abuse Childhood abuse or neglect Witnessing disturbing events such as domestic violence The loss of a parent Being involved or witnessing natural disasters Having a parent or close relative who suffers from a physical or mental health illness such as depression/anxiety Does childhood trauma ever go away? It is possible for those who have experienced trauma to heal from whatever traumatic event occurred earlier on in life. Recovery depends mostly on the types of childhood trauma experienced. Whether traumatic events included physical abuse, physical or sexual abuse, or exposure to any other type of trauma -it is possible to begin to heal from the effects of childhood trauma with the right kind of treatment. Trapped trauma Since the impact of childhood abuse is so severe, earlier traumatic experiences get trapped in the brain and the nervous system, affecting both the physical health and mental health of the trauma survivor. Hyperarousal In a situation where the trauma becomes “stuck” within the body, the individual begins to oscillate between states of hyperarousal – when this occurs a person may experience: Increased alertness Hyperarousal or go into fight or flight even when there is no evidence of a physical threat Mood swings Stress, anxiety and depression On a positive note, there are treatments available to treat trauma-related symptoms, which get discussed shortly. Can the brain heal from childhood trauma? It is fascinating how the chemicals in our brains change to protect us. When it comes to a traumatic event such as childhood sexual abuse, trauma survivors usually describe their lives in the paradigm of “before” and “after”. Before and after; the effects of childhood trauma The way a person was before the sexual abuse occurred and the person they became due to the abuse are two very different people. Children who have experienced sexual abuse, for example, tend to become withdrawn and isolated. These personality traits are sometimes confused with the child becoming a moody teenager, and in some instances, children get criticized for the sudden changes to their emotions and mood. Adults rarely question why their child’s mood has changed so dramatically, or why they might be acting out - this adds another dimension to the psychological trauma experienced by so many abuse survivors. Chemical changes in the brain According to mental health experts, the impact of childhood abuse changes the neurological patterns in the brain. These changes occur because of the plastic nature of the brain. It is important to note that this plasticity does have some repercussions, however, all this presents an opportunity to heal as the brain alterations associated with childhood abuse can be reversed. The potential of neuroplasticity Research suggests that when seeking treatment from the impact of childhood sexual abuse, people must explore programs that understand how to exploit the potential of neuroplasticity. All these are vital components of the healing process. Equally, when addressing the emotions and physical symptoms of childhood sexual abuse, a wide range of therapies include specialized trauma-focused treatments designed to treat childhood traumas. The Amygdala A part of the brain called the Amygdala is responsible for experiencing emotion and gets impacted by childhood trauma. Adults and children with a history of childhood trauma are known to react to small threats. All this occurs because the way the Amygdala becomes sensitized during traumatic events meaning that fear responses get triggered by less stress. Through trauma therapy, it is vital to calm the Amygdala by working on reducing any anxiety symptoms. What are the symptoms of childhood trauma? Some of the acute symptoms for those who have experienced trauma usually involve: Shame: Feelings of deep, persistent guilt are toxic and must get addressed as this experience causes blockages when healing from trauma - e.g. the abuse survivor may blame themselves for the abuse, or they may feel like they caused the abuse to happen. Trust issues: When a person’s cognitive-behavioural functions are impaired or their brain development gets stunted through trauma. The individual’s perspective is somewhat different from others. All this causes a wide range of emotional issues, including the inability to trust other people. Attachment problems: Abuse causes people to develop attachment problems. All this comes as no surprise since someone who had their attachments severed in early life finds it hard to create a secure attachment to others as an adult. Isolation: Those with traumatic memories or those who suffer PTSD are likely to be impacted by those memories everyday either on a conscious or subconscious level. There are times when it’s much easier to retreat into isolation instead of facing the world. What are the long-lasting effects of childhood trauma? Unfortunately, around 61 per cent of the US population experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 6 adults has reported multiple ACEs. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) Adverse childhood experiences are traumatic experiences that occurred during childhood. ACEs include: Parents getting divorced Witnessing domestic violence or any other type of violence Abuse or neglect (i.e. physical, emotional and sexual) Being bullied Any occurrence of natural disaster Being involved in a car accident or witnessing a shocking incident The long-term impact of trauma Adults who experienced trauma as children may go onto developing a multitude of physical and mental health problems - these may include: Substance use disorders PTSDC-PTSD (complex - post traumatic stress disorder) Depression and anxiety Anger problems The implications that traumas have on a person’s physical health include: Heart disease Obesity Chronic pain Premature death Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) PTSD is a condition commonly experienced by survivors of abuse. The condition may be an immediate response to an unpleasant event or may develop slowly over time. Either way, the symptoms associated with PTSD are unpleasant, and at times, frightening. PTSD usually develops because of unreleased trauma that gets stored in the brain or the nervous system. Symptoms of PTSD include: Reliving - this involves flashbacks, nightmares and hallucinations about the event Increased arousal - this involves anger, rage, irritability, increased alertness, problems with sleeping and concentrating Guilt and other negative thoughts and feelings Avoidance - avoiding people, places, events or memories that remind a person of the trauma Flat affect Treatment for childhood trauma Delayed response or indeed an immediate response to traumatic experiences are both typical. A mental health professional will work through your trauma with you and give you the right support and alleviate your symptoms. Trauma symptoms rarely disappear by themselves, so those experiencing trauma symptoms must seek support and help. There is a wide range of therapies specifically designed to treat trauma – they involve: EMDR Therapy (eye movement desensitization reprocessing) EMDR therapy is a type of psychotherapy treatment that was created by Shapiro (2001). This type of therapy helps facilitate the reprocessing and accessing of traumatic memories through Shapiro’s Adaptive Information Process Model. The process of EMDR therapy is to bring forth the adaptive resolution of traumatic memories and other ACEs so that they get viewed through a different lens - one that seeks resolve and acceptance. During an EMDR session, the client focuses on emotionally upsetting material in brief doses while concentrating on an external stimulus. The most common form of EMDR is through specific lateral eye movements directed by a therapist. Other stimuli involve audio stimulation and tapping of the hands. Resolution EMDR therapy has a three-pronged approach. Any past events that have caused dysfunction are processed, and new associative links get reinforced with adaptive information The present conditions that cause distress are exposed, and external and internal triggers become desensitized Any events that may happen in the future get considered; this helps the patient acquire the skill set needed for long term adaptation and functioning Other treatment Traumatic memories get processed through other avenues of therapy, such as: Reaching out Healing from trauma takes time – but recovery is possible for those who are willing to go through the process of recovery from trauma in childhood. A child may not have any influence over what happens to them. However, as adults, we get the opportunity to confront any mental health challenges that may arise from the stress of trauma with the help and support of a mental health professional. If you feel you need help processing any past traumas or are experiencing any of the unpleasant symptoms mentioned above – please get in touch with one of our specialists at Tikvah Lake Recovery who will help you.







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