Understanding the Developmental Effects of Trauma

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MYTHS

• All it takes is love.
• Time heals all wounds.
• Little children don’t remember what happens, so we can move them with impunity.
• Our traditional therapeutic “toolboxes” are sufficient.
Complex Trauma (NCTSN)

- Exposure to multiple traumatic events that occur within the caregiving relationship – the system that is supposed to be the source of safety and stability in a child’s life.
- Maltreatment $\rightarrow$ emotional dysregulation $\rightarrow$ loss of secure base $\rightarrow$ loss of direction $\rightarrow$ inability to detect or respond to danger $\rightarrow$ revictimization
Relational Trauma: A Complex Trauma Perspective

Trauma of the maltreatment itself.
+ Loss of the parent as a source of security and comfort.
+ Overwhelming internal distress with no assistance in regulating.
Impact of Neglect

[Image: Two brain scans labeled "Normal" and "Extreme Neglect", with text "3 Year Old Children" above them.]
NCTSN Data

9,336 children and youth served nationally:

- 70% multiple forms of trauma
- 48% significant behavioral problems
- 41% significant academic problems
- 31% significant attachment
- 11% suicidality

Diagnostic Problems

• **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**
  
  CANS Study 7668 abused children in foster care: 63% had trauma symptoms, but nearly 95% did not meet criteria for PTSD

• **Developmental Trauma Disorder (proposed)**
Developmental Trauma Disorder
Domains of Impairment

Proposed
Bessel van der Kolk MD
www.traumacenter.org
Developmental Trauma Disorder
Domains of Impairment

• Attachment
• Biology/Physiology
• Affect Regulation
• Dissociation
• Behavioral Control
• Cognitions
• Self Concept
Developmental Effects

- Interpersonal
- Sense of Self
- Ability to Think
- Emotional Regulation
- Brain Development & Physiology
Distress-Relief Cycle

Distress → Empathic Caregiving → Relief → Attachment → Distress
Benefits

- Reciprocity (give & take)
- Effectance (I can effect behavior in others, therefore, “I matter”)
- Trust
- Interest
- Reward
- Joy
- Early templates of affect regulation

↑

Attention
Attunement

→ Increases regulation ("feeling felt by")

• Sympathy vs. Empathy
Liabilities

- Impaired reciprocity;
- Impaired sense that “I matter”
- Impaired trust;
- Impaired interest → attention;
- Impaired reward → joy;
- Impaired affect regulation.
Importance of Misattunement

If managed effectively teaches:

- Negative feelings can be endured;
- Caregiver (others) as resource;
- Frustration tolerance;
- Increases resilience;
- Interactive repair.
Misattunement: Not Handled

• Failures in interactive repair;
• Dysregulated shame and overwhelming affects → overwhelm coping;
• Impaired vocabulary for internal states;
• Not internalizing caregiver as resource;
• Affective biases.
Unrelieved Distress

- Arousal $\rightarrow$ cortisol stress response;
- Numbing (endogenous opioids);
- Freezing;
- Compulsive self-reliance;
Conditioned Fear Responses (LeDoux)

Thinking Brain

Sensory Input

Stimulus

Amygdala

Reaction
Conditioned Fear Responses

(LeDoux)

Thinking Brain

Emotional Brain

Amygdala

Stimulus

Reaction

Thalamus
Development of the Hemispheres

- **Left Hemisphere**
  - Develops later
  - Responsive to stability
  - Promotes inhibition

- **Right Hemisphere**
  - Develops earlier
  - Responsive to activation (changes in the environment)
  - Promotes activation
Roles of the Hemispheres

**Left**
- Language
- Sequential, logical
- Content
- Social emotions
  - Guilt & remorse
  - Pride
- Inhibition

**Right**
- Nonverbal communication
- Context
- Primary emotions
- Selective attention
- Tactile perceptions
- Internal representation
Maltreatment and Effects on Social Information Processing

• Distorted perceptions
• Hostile attributional bias (Ken Dodge)
• Impaired ability to think about one’s thoughts and feelings
• Conclusions
• Limited recall and difficulty associating current behaviors with past maltreatment.
Internal Working Model

Secure
- I am lovable, worthy, capable, good.....
- Others are basically good, helpful, caring...
- The world is a safe & predictable place.

Insecure
- I am bad, defective, unworthy, unlovable...
- Others are hurtful, coercive, rejecting...
- The world is a dangerous, chaotic place.
Perceptions + Beliefs → Behavior
Importance of a Coherent Narrative

• Make sense of life experiences;
• Challenge early ego-centric beliefs;
• Integrate positive and negative feelings;
• Acquire greater security in attachment.
Effects of Trauma on the Self System

• “False self”;

• Profound shame;

• Early maladaptive schemas or life scripts: Abandonment, Mistrust, Defectiveness/shame
Effects of Trauma on Interpersonal Functioning

• Deficits in empathy

• Deficits in social emotions;

• Deficits in pro-social behaviors;

• Deficits in moral development.
Empathy Training

• Attunement
• Empathy (subjective)
• Empathy (interpersonal)
  ➢ Recognizing feelings (affective)
  ➢ Taking perspective of other
Touchstones of Strategy

- **Safety** first and foremost!!!
- Developmental (not chronological) age
- Determine “Won’t” versus “Can’t”
- Corrective experiences of attunement so the child “feels felt by” another
- Making sense of experience
- Applied developmental psychology
Advocacy

- Establishing permanency
- Prevent multiple placements
- Educate parents (birth, foster, adoptive) to recognize trauma reactions and find ways to cope in constructive ways
- Advocate for the Developmental Trauma Disorder Diagnosis (www.dsm5.org)
Selected References

- www.nctsn.org
References Cont’d

