

Trauma-sensitive Interviewing of Minors

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Learning Objectives

- Participants will understand what trauma is and how to be more trauma-informed and responsive in their GAL practice.
- Participants will learn simple techniques to regulate their own nervous systems to better interact with their child clients.
- Participants will learn how to recognize and navigate trauma manifestations in their child clients from a developmentally appropriate perspective

What are we talking about

- Toxic Stress
- Trauma
- Trauma informed / Trauma responsive
 - Trauma informed means understanding what trauma is and how it affects you and your clients and everyone else in the system
 - Trauma responsive means doing something about that
- The spectrum of experiences

The spectrum

- Emergency – need a first responder
- Harm to self/others
- Crisis – When the brain shuts down, and intervention is needed
- **Situation – what we deal with every day**

Trauma Definitions

Merriam Webster:

- a : an injury (such as a wound) to living tissue caused by an extrinsic agent
- b : a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury
- c : an emotional upset

Trauma definitions - *DSM 5*

“the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others.”

Objective definition

Trauma definition - Van der Kolk

"For human beings, the best predictor of something becoming traumatic seems to be a situation in **which they no longer can imagine a way out**; when fighting or fleeing no longer is an option and they feel overpowered and helpless."

Trauma definitions - Peter Levine

- ☐ Trauma is not in the event - it is in the nervous system
- ☐ *Perceived* threat
- ☐ Overwhelmed nervous system
- ☐ Loss of connection
- ☐ Loss of wholeness

Trauma definition - overall

Anything that overwhelms our capacity to cope and respond and leaves us feeling helpless, hopeless, and out of control

Autonomic Nervous System

Sympathetic Fight and flight

- Alerts the nervous system
- React rather than respond
- Resources to immediate action: muscles, heart, nerves
- Increases stress hormones: cortisol, adrenaline

Parasympathetic Freeze

- Deer in headlights
- Overactive parasympathetic response
- Stuck in "off"
- Depression, disconnection, deadness, exhaustion, flat affect

Parasympathetic - rest and digest

- Slows the nervous system
- Respond rather than react
- Resources to "non-essential" functions: growth, immunity, rest
- Increases healing hormones: Human growth, oxytocin

Types of Trauma

Shock trauma: an event that happened too fast and too soon, and overwhelms our capacity to cope and respond

Developmental Trauma: due to an ongoing misattunement between a child and the primary caretaker.

Systemic/ Institutionalized Trauma: racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, oppression etc.

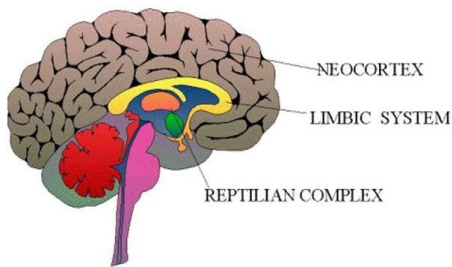
Types of trauma our clients experience

Internal to your case

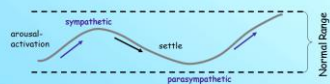
- Domestic violence
- High conflict between parents or caregivers
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Removal from family
- Neglect
- Coming to court?

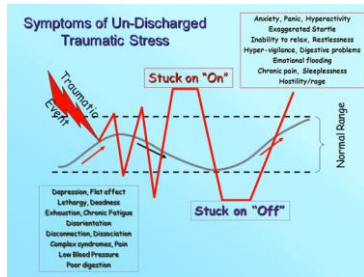
External to your case

- Bullying
- Families worried about immigration status
- Crime near home
- Health issues in family
- Political climate
- Societal / institutionalized trauma
- Oppression



A Healthy Nervous System





Complex Trauma

- Events are severe and pervasive
- Beginning early in life - can interrupt the formation of self
- Systemic and Institutional traumas (living undocumented)
- Touches every aspect of life and development

ACE Study

ACE = Adverse Childhood Experiences

10 types of early childhood trauma

Changes to the size of the hippocampus (smaller) and the amygdala (bigger)

Children with ACEs of 4 or more

- 2x as likely to be overweight
- 32.6x as likely to have been diagnosed with learning and behavioral problems

What we can do about it - Self Regulate!

Behavior - Ability to act in your long-term best interest with your deepest values

Emotionally - Ability to self regulate when you are upset and cheer yourself up when you are down

Grounded and Centered in the present moment!

Noticing trauma – Physical**

- Tension / pain (headaches, back pain, chest pain)
- Hyperarousal
- DSM PTSD symptoms (flashbacks, nightmares)
- Panic attacks
- Hypersensitivity to light, sound, smell, touch, or taste
- Feeling fatigued or drained

** Gina Ross – "Beyond the Trauma Vortex, Into the Healing Vortex"

Noticing trauma - Emotional

- Intense, unpredictable, and irrational emotions
- Dramatic mood swings
- Uncontrollable feelings of fear and rage or terror
- Profound feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- Disruption of the usual sense of safety and predictability

Noticing trauma - Mental

- Confusion and disorientation
- Inability to learn and concentrate
- Paranoid beliefs and obsessive negative thoughts
- Tendency to become more radical and more intolerant of differences
- Loss of ability to reason and be reasonable
- Losing interest in activities
- Self-blame
- Becoming cynical and disenfranchised

Noticing trauma - Behavioral

- Turning away from / cutting off from resources
- Acting out, impulsive, or risky behaviors
- Addiction/substance abuse
- Social isolation
- Depression
- Hypervigilant
- Perfectionist or OCD-like behaviors to regain sense of control

Noticing trauma - Social

- Feeling powerless and isolated in the social order
- Rage/anger turned against society
- Mistrust or hatred of society

Noticing trauma - Spiritual

- Losing a sense of humanness
- Deep feelings of shame in relation to spirit
- Disbelief or rejection of a higher power
- Misplaced feelings of pride that result in callousness and lack of compassion

Noticing trauma - Family and collective

- Violence and abuse
- Extreme polarization of beliefs and emotions against "groups"
- Distortion of collective narrative
- Growing intolerance of differences

Self Regulation - How it helps

Respond rather than react

Help child client feel safer and calmer

Model what can help a child

Better able to hold space for a child client

Professional Trauma - Personal

- Conflict between professionals
- Inappropriate emails
- Inappropriate statements about age, gender, abilities
- Attacking witnesses on the stand
- Blaming a professional for how a case (or situation) turned out
- Lack of civility

Professional Trauma - Vicarious

- Stems from seeing / hearing stories of trauma experienced by other people
- We cannot release the effects in the normal course, so we hold it in and end up with traumatic responses
- Seeing colleagues attacked as witnesses

Ramifications of Trauma for Professionals

- Burnout
- Somatic Complaints
- Substance Abuse
- Closed heart / Forgetting why we entered the profession
- Exhaustion
- Short fuse
- Apathy / Disgust
- "Waiting for the other shoe to drop"

"Trauma stewardship can be defined as a daily practice through which individuals, organizations, and societies tend to the hardship, pain or trauma experienced by humans, other living beings, or our planet itself. *Those who support trauma stewardship believe that both joy and pain are realities of life, and that suffering can be transformed into meaningful growth and healing when a quality of presence is cultivated and maintained even in the face of great suffering.*"

From Trauma Stewardship by L. van dernoot Lipsky

TRAUMA/ TRIGGER + NO RESOURCE =

TRAUMA SYMPTOMS

TRAUMA/ TRIGGER + RESOURCE =

HEALING

Self Care

- Community Supports – TALK to people, even if not about what happened
 - The MOST important way humans heal is together, especially through laughter
- Meditation/Yoga/Breathing Be in nature (hike, beach, mountains, hug a tree)
- Exercise - get the stuck trauma energy moving
- Take a day off (assuming you get permission)
- Do one of your hobbies
- Spiritual pursuits – remember to connect to your beliefs and try to see the good in the world
- Stop watching the news / things that might trigger you

Additional self care

- Any touch work – massage / facial / spa day
 - Take a real lunch break and eat at a restaurant or go shopping/for a walk during lunch
 - Volunteer – feel good about doing something in the world
 - Watch a funny movie / Listen to your favorite music
 - Creative expression in whatever way you love
 - Play with your pets
 - Get extra sleep
 - Professional help – preferably someone trained in trauma healing
- Anything that makes you happy (that is not substance abuse) can be healing, and it's better if it includes other people

Results of Counteracting Vicarious Trauma

- Trust
- Honesty
- Tolerance
- Joy
- Generosity
- Open-mindedness
- Patience

Trauma and your clients in interviews

Where to interview?

- Parents' home
- Foster home
- Group home
- Court
- Your office
- School
- Church
- Dentist office

Where you interview matters

- Safe, confidential location
- Should the door be closed?
- Who can hear you?
- What happens to the child before / after the interview?

Child development matters

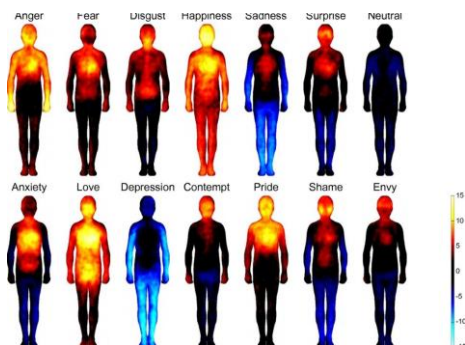
- Children can hold different information at different ages
- Children communicate in different ways, particularly at different ages
- The way children retell events changes with age

Trauma and memory

- Trauma fragments episodic memory
- Traumatic stories are difficult to tell
 - There are many reasons children's stories change – trauma is one of them
- Somatic memories are less likely to change

Trauma and memory – types of memories

- Explicit / Conscious
 - Declarative – objective and devoid of feeling
 - Episodic
 - These have feelings and create a story of our lives
 - These memories can literally change with telling and enhance our future lives
- Implicit / Unconscious – sensations, emotions, and behaviors
 - Emotional – how we connect to ourselves and each other on an emotional level
 - Procedural – these are body-based memories – these encode much younger than explicit memories (from the womb)



What you might see or hear - External

32.6x as likely to have behavior or learning problems

ADHD / ODD diagnoses

Failure to Thrive / Obesity

No diagnosis for toxic stress / complex trauma

What you might see or hear – fight response

- Language / emotions – Expressions of causing harm or battle and anger
- Posture – Someone looks like they are fighting (leaning forward)
- Breath is short and rapid
- This is common in teenagers and less common in school-aged children / almost non-existent in infants

What you might see or hear – flight response

- Language – Child can say they will hide in their room / they will try to leave the conversation we are having with them
- Posture – Looking around for an escape route / shaking legs* / look ready to flee any moment
- More common in younger children – but remember, it is normal for children not to want to sit still, so is it trauma manifestation or normal development?

What you might see or hear – freeze response

- Language – Cannot feel, asking you to repeat yourself, report being relaxed
- Lack of affect
- Posture – collapsed posture, look tense
- Breathing is usually shallow
- Want to do everything on their own
- This is common in all of our clients!

What if you see them all?

- Most common in complex trauma
- Brakes and accelerator at the same time
- This just tells us how overwhelmed the system is
- Not an easy place for us to interview children

What do we do about it?

- Many of our clients dissociate – notice where it happens
- They are not going to communicate through words – often what children do not say is more important than what they do say
- Facial Affect mirroring – ask your clients to show you how they feel rather than tell you how they feel
- The nervous system can only take so much – our conversations with clients can overwhelm them
- Give them time!

Avoiding retraumatization

- Self Regulation!
- Emphasize trust / safety (this takes time)
- Non-judgmental
- Inconsistencies happen - try not to focus on them
- Be honest!
- Speak in a confidential (but safe) location
- Avoid challenging questions
- Listen!
- If you make a mistake, own it
- Notice stress responses and respond appropriately to them

Thank you

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