



How trauma impacts individuals and couples

INDIVIDUALS

What is trauma?

- A traumatic event is an overwhelming or uncontrollable experience that can happen to anyone at any age.
- It may be a life-threatening experience or may involve witnessing something that causes you to feel horrified, helpless, or intensely fearful for your life or the lives of others.
- Traumatic events can include child abuse, domestic violence/partner violence, combat violence, sudden/unexpected loss of a loved one, car accident, sexual abuse/violence, and natural disasters (e.g., hurricane).

How might trauma impact you?

- **Sense of self:** helplessness, shame, guilt, self-blame, feeling “not normal”, altered sense of age.
- **Memory and perception:** memory problems, dissociation (feeling outside of your body, losing time, not feeling real).
- **Sense of meaning:** loss of faith, despair, feeling that you don’t have a future, hopelessness.
- **Relationships:** tendency to be revictimized, isolation, difficulty having close relationships due to mistrust, difficulties with resolving conflicts, secrets, tendency to view others as rescuers/victims/aggressors, repeating problematic relationship patterns.
- **Physical well-being:** sleep problems, eating problems, substance abuse, other health problems.
- **Emotional well-being:** difficulty tolerating and experiencing difficult emotions, including anxiety, sadness, and anger; alternating between numbness (no feelings) and out of control (too much feeling).

How is childhood trauma different?

- It occurs during periods of important development of social, emotional, cognitive, and physical growth.
- It is an overwhelming or uncontrollable traumatic experience that can happen to anyone at any age; however, when trauma occurs in childhood, the impacts can be more severe and long-lasting because the trauma has an impact on your overall development.
- It often happens in the context of relationships where the person who hurts you is also the person who is supposed to take care of you.

How have you coped with these challenges?

- How effective were these strategies?
- Did these behaviours work long-term?



COUPLES

How might childhood trauma affect your couple relationships?

- **Trust:** When people are traumatized in childhood, especially by people close to them, this can impact their ability to trust their partners in adulthood.
- **Closeness:** Because you may feel that being close to others has been the source of pain and trauma, being close to your partner in adulthood may feel frightening and dangerous. Often, childhood trauma survivors avoid closeness and, in so doing, become alienated and isolated from their partners. It may seem cliché, but there is research supporting that adage that you cannot love someone else until you can love yourself. Different researchers have found that childhood trauma can lead to long-lasting feelings of shame, self-doubt, insecurity, and high levels of self-criticism, all of which can, in turn, make it very difficult for childhood trauma survivors to share with and feel close to their partners.
- **Sexuality:** Because childhood trauma occurs during periods of developmental growth, including sexual development, trauma can impact a person's capacity to feel comfortable in their sexuality. In particular, sexual abuse, especially when perpetrated by someone close to you, can make it difficult to enjoy sex and sexuality in your couple relationship. Certain sexual positions, feelings, and states of arousal may bring up intense feelings of fear and anxiety and provoke flashbacks or vivid reminders of your abuse experiences.
- **Emotion regulation and empathy:** Childhood trauma can make it very difficult to understand, feel, and tolerate your emotions and those of your partner. This can mean that when you or your partner are feeling upset and need one another, it may be very difficult for you to tolerate these feelings, to understand the feelings of your partner, and sometimes, to even think in the presence of your own or your partner's distress.
- **Communication:** Childhood trauma survivors often have significant difficulties with communication. As a child, being assertive, clear, and honest may have been dangerous or the information you shared might have been used against you. This may make it very difficult for you to talk to your partner about challenges and conflicts, and sometimes, even everyday things like domestic tasks and childcare become a challenge.

How have these challenges affected your relationship?

- What was it like at the beginning?
- Have things changed over time?

How have you coped with these challenges?

- How effective were these strategies?
- Did these strategies work long-term?