

Supporting Adults with a Background of Trauma

Being in a relationship with an adult who has experienced trauma can present significant challenges. It can be difficult for partners or family members to understand why their loved one responds to certain events the way they do, resulting in unhealthy dynamics in a relationship. However, these challenges are not insurmountable.

Adults with trauma may find it very difficult to articulate what is going on inside of them, making it hard for those around them to know what to do to help. This is due to disrupted emotional processing and difficulties with emotional regulation.

Because their bodies are used to being in survival states in order to cope with the traumatic experiences they have lived through, adults with trauma may have an overactive stress response system. In other words, they are not always able to process emotional experiences in a healthy way and may become easily emotionally dysregulated (resulting in a fight/ flight/ freeze or fawn stress response).

Just like children and young people with trauma, adults with a background of trauma may have heightened sensitivities to certain environmental stimuli (hypervigilance) leading to distorted perceptions of reality, along with hair-trigger emotional reactions to seemingly small or imagined stresses or threats (known as 'emotional flashbacks' (Walker, 2013)).

An 'emotional flashback' is when an individual is catapulted back to deep-seated emotions from the past and feels taken over by them in the present moment. These intense feelings may be triggered by something that unconsciously takes them back to a past experience, such as a feeling of being scared, trapped or powerless, with no options for escape. If the intense emotions experienced at the time of the traumatic event(s) such as fear and powerlessness are 'stuck' in their nervous system (i.e. if they have not been fully processed), when they are reminded of the past event, they will unconsciously be triggered into reliving these intense emotions and may struggle to manage their reactions to these emotions.

The individual may therefore develop survival identities or 'false-selves' to cope. For instance, many adults with trauma may become angry quickly, distrust others' motives, behave in a controlling way, experience panic attacks, or become disengaged.

It can be especially confusing and frustrating for those close to adults with a background of trauma to understand these reactions because often they come without any warning, in situations that others might perceive as completely non-threatening.

Without understanding the effects of trauma on an adult's nervous system, it can be tempting to lash out or become angry with a loved one. You may wish that they were 'more like' someone else and express disapproval towards them for their seemingly irrational behaviours. However, a disapproving response can threaten their sense of self-worth, which can then reinforce trauma reactions (at best) or result in re-traumatisation (at worst).

A healthier approach is to cultivate compassion towards your loved one and help them to feel safe. Together with your loved one, identify and be aware of significant stress triggers for 'emotional flashbacks' and then support your loved one using the 4Ss: help them to feel safe, seen and soothed, in order to feel secure.

For example, if your loved one becomes anxious or irritable when you tell them you are going away with a friend for the weekend, try to identify what stress triggers may be causing such a strong reaction. If you are aware that your loved one experienced abuse or neglect as a child, the trigger may be that they are reliving feelings of fear and powerlessness associated with being betrayed, rejected or abandoned in the past, resulting in an 'emotional flashback'. Although your loved one understands the difference between a trip with friends in the present and a past experience of betrayal on a conscious level, their stress response system is automatically triggered, which may result in the survival brain unconsciously hijacking the thinking brain.

When you acknowledge this process together consciously, you can offer your loved one reassurance that they are safe, check in with them often emotionally so that they feel seen, and support them in their practice of regulating their emotional responses so that they feel comforted.

Being trauma informed is essential for developing compassion for your loved one. Having an understanding of how trauma affects the nervous system and how trauma responses are often outside of an individual's conscious control can reframe your thinking in a more positive way.

Instead of believing that their behaviour is an attack on you, you can view it as an intense emotional reaction coming from an overwhelmed nervous system. A defence mechanism that has served to protect a hidden wound, but that no longer serves them.

In this way, you can support your loved one to develop new, healthier, and more conscious responses – perhaps with the support of a trained therapist who specialises in trauma. You are not condoning their behaviour but supporting them to find a way out of repeating old patterns.

It is also important to recognize your own triggers and how these are activated in your relationship so that you can regulate yourself.

Ensure you both have clear boundaries about what you value as individuals (e.g. creativity, adventure, time alone etc) and work to create shared values with your loved one in order to build trust and security.

Trauma can be debilitating and draining for all those who encounter it, be it directly or vicariously. At times, you and your loved one may feel hopeless to resolve it.

However, with committed compassion and conscious practices that encourage growth and expansion, rather than fear and contraction, it is possible for you and your loved one to work towards being the best versions of yourselves.

By Juliette Ttifa

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References:

Walker, P. (2013) *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform