

# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

*a professional perspective  
for moms and mentors*

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None of us ever expect the trials that come our way. Most cannot be anticipated or prepared for in advance. And the effects of a particular trial -- or trauma -- are not always recognized, understood, or addressed. Through being informed about the effects of trauma, we will gain a sensitivity to what we see and hear in others, and have a better understanding of how to care for those we love and when to seek professional help.

As a way to help you, in particular moms and mentors, we've created this short guide written by a clinical psychotherapist to give you insight into understanding trauma. Of course, it is not designed to replace seeking professional help, but rather to encourage you speak with a professional on the matters that concern you.

While this guide is written for caregivers, we highly recommend teens and twenty-somethings give it a read, as it is simply good information for you to have as you mature.

## What is trauma?

Trauma can best be described as a situation or set of circumstances that happen outside of a person's control. It is typically unexpected and may not have been experienced before.

Trauma leaves the brain unable to process the information as it is typically new and undesirable. In the days, months and years that follow the trauma, the information can either be assimilated into a schema, in other words the brain makes room for the experience in an existing category, thus being aware that the situation occurred and can occur, or the information is not assimilated and the brain is unable to find a place to put the traumatic circumstances.

## What happens after a trauma?

There are many factors involved in a person's ability to move forward after trauma. These may include a person's network of support, their proximity to the traumatic situation, if it has happened before or could happen again, and the resources available to guide processing and promote coping strategies.

If a person is in a situation where they feel a loss of control, it can lead to a sense of helplessness. After the trauma, the helplessness often turns into feelings of defeat or despair. These secondary emotions may then lend themselves to thought patterns such as:

- Why could I not stop that?
- Was it my fault?
- Is the world an unsafe place?

These are strong thoughts that can pervade decisions or actions moving forward, as well as alter view of self and/or other. This can also lead to an ultimate sense of distrust or disconnection with self and others.

## What happens to the memory?

Traumatic memories are also very important to understand when working through trauma. Memories are usually triggered sensually. In other words a person smells something or hears a sound that reminds them of the traumatic experience. Even though the current situation is safe, the sensory experience and memory trigger danger and the person will respond. The trigger can bring a person back to the event to the point that they are actually reliving the scenario that was traumatic.

It is very important to know the idiosyncrasies that are involved in each kind of a memory a person can have, and how it can be experienced, in order to know how to best support yourself or someone else through it. A particular article written by Diane Langberg, "Coping with Traumatic Memory" is very detailed in its description and will help with the specifics: <http://www.dianelangberg.com/work/articles/CopingWithTraumaticMemory.pdf>

## How do you process memories?

If memories are not processed in times or ways that decrease their prevalence they tend to increase at times that are unexpected and are hindering. For example, flashbacks, or triggers may manifest themselves in nightmares or pop up before a person is going to sleep leading to insomnia.

The best way to work through this is to begin processing with a professional or with someone not directly involved in the experience during the daytime. Though most people do not want to stop in the day to go to a dark place in their experience, the experience being processed in the day can reduce the occurrence of nightmares, night waking, or insomnia.

## Is trauma experienced differently?

A child's experience with trauma involves all of the above, but there are many added complexities due to their developmental limitations. Children have a limited context, and in most cases limited exposure to situations that are harmful, violent, or disturbing. Therefore the assimilation can take a lot longer or can be delayed as there is a literal disconnect from the child's known reality and the experience that has just occurred.

## What are the effects of trauma?

Children are more prone to the psychological effects of trauma due to the challenges they experience with regard to assimilating the experience. Again, the article by Diane Langberg is extremely informative in revealing these effects and how to cope with them when they occur. In brief, the following side effects are typical:

- *Repression* - the brains almost amnesia like response to a circumstance that provokes intense feelings of anxiety. The memory gets stored in the unconscious.
- *Disassociation* - this is when a person does not associate with the event until it is triggered and then they are literally reliving to the point that their attention and emotions detach from the present moment.

- *Splitting* - a coping mechanism where two realities are created in a person's experience. One is generally the more positive experience and the other is the negative happenings that are part of another self or reality.

A child (ages 2-18 years old) has limited ability to verbally process the thoughts and feelings that they may have after an event that is beyond their ability to understand. It is SO important that they are processing as much as they can, and that this processing happens in the daytime with a professional or with someone who is able to help scaffold verbal language for their thoughts and feelings.

The most common ways to work with non-verbal processing include allowing the child to express themselves through art or activity. A book that I would strongly recommend to help with this is by Liana Lowenstein, "Assessment and Treatment Activities for Children, Adolescents and Families." She also writes one for coping with bereavement.

These activities allow a child or adolescent to work through the thoughts and feelings in a medium that they feel comfortable or equipped to share in. It is important to note that the person doing these activities is a professional or someone who is able to work through these exercises objectively without projecting their own thoughts or feelings.

## Where can I find help?

You can seek professional help in dealing with the effects of trauma by speaking with a medical doctor, your child's pediatrician, or by contacting your church or Focus on the Family for a list of Christian counselors in your area.

*This guide is written by Cara Dixon, a clinical psychotherapist. Cara is a valuable contributor and advisor on the More to Be Team.*