

What is Complex Trauma?

Blue Knot Foundation face sheet about complex trauma and its differences from single incident trauma

It is important to differentiate single-incident trauma (associated with standard PTSD) from complex trauma (Shapiro 2010). (There is now a new diagnosis of Complex PTSD in the ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases): i.e. CPTSD which is different to standard PTSD.

- Single incident trauma refers to one-off events such as experiencing or witnessing single incidents of assault, natural disasters or accidents
- Complex trauma refers to cumulative, underlying, and often interpersonal trauma, commonly from childhood (Courtois and Ford, 2009). It often occurs when the child victim is trapped and under the control and domination of the perpetrator (Herman, 2009).
- Complex trauma can also occur as a result of children's and adults' experience of violence within the community. Examples include: domestic and family violence, civil unrest, war trauma or genocide, ethnic cleansing, refugees and asylum seekers, cultural dislocation, sexual exploitation and trafficking, extreme medical trauma from repeated interventions, inter and transgenerational and collective trauma and/or re-traumatisation of victims later in life.
- Complex trauma has more substantial long-term impacts on emotional and physical health, relationships and daily functioning than single incident trauma (Banyard et al. 2009; Cashmore & Shackel, 2013).
- Complex trauma occurs within a social context which permits abuse, violence and exploitation (Herman, 2009). Social marginalisation and oppression can exacerbate the impacts of complex trauma (Briere and Spinazzola, 2009).

It has been established that with the right support trauma can be resolved; people can and do recover (Siegel, 2003, 2010).