

Emotions and Arousal (including dissociation)

Blue Knot Foundation fact sheet about complex trauma, emotions, arousal and dissociation

1 Emotions

- People with trauma experiences often have strong emotions. They can find them difficult to manage or regulate.
- Struggling to manage emotions can start in childhood. This is because when children don't receive the care and nurture they need, they don't learn to manage their emotions.
- When people are triggered, they can experience sudden strong feelings. These feelings include terror, rage, distress and panic.
- Some triggers cause flashbacks; i.e. the sudden reliving of previous trauma experiences. Flashbacks often bring strong emotions, sensations and body movements. This is because trauma is often stored in the body.
- Flashbacks can be frightening. They come on unexpectedly and can throw a person back into past feelings of being overwhelmed.

2 Arousal

- When people are triggered, they go into fight/flight/freeze (survival) mode. In survival mode, people can be agitated (hyper-aroused) or shut down (hypo-aroused). People with complex trauma swing between being hyper and hypo-aroused at different times.
- Changes in arousal can lead to strong emotions. People use different coping strategies and behaviours to try and manage their emotions.
- There is a level of arousal at which a person functions at their best and can tolerate their emotions. This is called the 'window of tolerance'. When a person is hypo or hyper-aroused they are outside of their window of tolerance.

3 Dissociation

- Dissociation is a type of freeze (hypo-arousal) response. A freeze response is harder to recognise than hyperarousal because there may be no visible signs.
- Most people are not aware that they are dissociating because it is an automatic response. Everyone dissociates at times. Examples of everyday dissociation include daydreaming or being absorbed in a task. This is 'normal' and does not cause a problem for the person.
- Dissociation can also occur as a survival response to severe trauma. Trauma-related dissociation causes 'disconnects' between thoughts, feelings, sensations and behaviour. These disconnects occur outside of conscious awareness.
- Dissociation can mean that a traumatised person can't function in a smooth integrated (working together) way. This can cause challenges for the person.
- Some people with trauma-related dissociation are diagnosed with different conditions. These are called Dissociative Disorders, of which Dissociative Identity Disorder is the best known.

