

Understanding Trauma, Complex Trauma and Childhood Trauma

Blue Knot Foundation fact sheet explaining trauma, complex trauma and childhood trauma.

1 Understanding trauma

- The word 'trauma' describes events and experiences which are so stressful that they are overwhelming.
- The word 'trauma' also describes the impacts of the experience/s. The impacts depend on a number of factors.
- People can experience trauma at any age. Many people experience trauma across different ages.
- Trauma can happen once, or it can be repeated. Experiences of trauma are common and can have many sources.
- Trauma can affect us at the time it occurs as well as later. If we don't receive the right support, trauma can affect us right through our life.
- We all know someone who has experienced trauma. It can be a friend, a family member, a colleague, or a client... or it can be us.
- It can be hard to recognize that a person has experienced trauma and that it is still affecting them.
- Trauma is often experienced as emotional and physical harm. It can cause fear, hopelessness and helplessness.
- Trauma interrupts the connections ('integration') between different aspects of the way we function.

- Trauma can stop our body systems from working together. This can affect our mental and physical health and wellbeing.
- While people who experience trauma often have similar reactions, each person and their experience is unique.
- Trauma can affect whole communities. It can also occur between and across generations, e.g. the trauma of First Nations people.
- For our First Nations people, colonisation and policies such as the forced removal of children broke important bonds between families and kin and damaged connection to land and place.
- Many different groups of people experience high levels of trauma. This includes refugees and asylum seekers, and women and children in different ways. LGBTQI people also experience high levels of trauma due to discrimination.
- Certain life situations and difference can make trauma more common. People with disability of all ages experience and witness trauma more often than people without disability.

2 Understanding childhood trauma

- Negative experiences can overwhelm a child's capacity to cope. Abuse (sexual, physical, emotional and spiritual), violence, neglect and exploitation are negative experiences which are often traumatic.
- Other childhood experiences can be damaging too. A child can experience trauma when the adults caring for them are unable to respond to or meet their emotional or physical needs. This can happen when those adults are still affected by their own trauma experiences.
- Sometimes a parent or caregiver misuses alcohol, drugs or medication, or they may struggle with their mental health. They might not have enough money and be able to provide a safe or stable home. A child can also experience trauma from grief and loss. This can happen if a loved one dies, or if caregivers separate.
- Trauma experienced in childhood is damaging and can mean that the child is less able to explore and learn.
- Trauma can affect a child's development, depending on the age/s at which it is experienced. This can also affect adult health if the person does not recover from it.
- Childhood trauma can affect the way children attach or bond to the adult/s caring for them. Trauma which happens between people is called interpersonal trauma.

- Trauma from childhood is often extreme, ongoing and repeated. This is called complex trauma.
- Complex trauma from childhood events is common. It affects 1 in 4 Australian adults, and sometimes causes impacts into old age.
- People who have experienced trauma as a child can be triggered by anything which reminds them of past experiences. Triggers in the present can bring back challenging memories, thoughts and feelings from the past. Sometimes it can feel as though the trauma is happening in the present. This can be frightening, overwhelming and confusing.

3 Understanding complex trauma

- Complex trauma is different to the trauma of a single incident such as an accident, bushfire, flood or one instance of sexual or physical assault.
- Complex trauma has more damaging long-term effects on physical and emotional health and wellbeing than 'single incident' PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) alone. Examples of complex trauma include domestic and family violence, refugee trauma, and war and community violence.
- Complex trauma can occur from repeated interpersonal trauma as a child, an adult or both.
- Complex trauma can happen at home, in the family, in services or in institutions. People can also experience medical trauma even when the treatment is helpful.
- More than 5 million Australian adults are living with the impacts of complex trauma.

