Complex Trauma for the Homeless Services System

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The Video was good!

- Traumatized brain tries to protect itself
  - Fight, flight, freeze
- Repeated abuse makes symptoms worse
- Unexpected behavior can come from reminders of the events
- Trauma symptoms are a normal response to an abnormal experience.

- We should be wondering “what happened to you” more than what is wrong with you.
Trauma in people who are homeless

- You know, many people who are homeless have had MULTIPLE TRAUMAS.
- For some the trauma started very early, and made them vulnerable to later stressful events.
  - Made it MORE likely stress would result in TRAUMA SYMPTOMS.
- When people have had multiple traumatic events and develop trauma reactions to these events, we call their condition COMPLEX TRAUMA.
  - It can be a bit difficult to know this is the case at first because SECONDARY, TERTIARY, and even QUATERNARY problems arise.
  - You may be meeting them after a whole series of traumas and behaviors related to trauma have been developed.
Associated or Secondary Symptoms of Trauma

- Poor self care
- Poor self protection
- Substance Use Disorders
- Activities to reduce discomfort
- Poor frustration tolerance
- Poor problem solving
- Self Harmful Behaviors
- Give up on participating in Society
- Crime
The concept of “psychological trauma”

• An experience
• A psychological and physiological reaction
  • Overwhelms coping abilities
• Causes neurobiological, psychological, cognitive, and social changes within a person
  • Memory (fear memories), emotional regulation, social interactions with others, blood pressure, pulse rate, hypervigilance, internal working models
• Impact on many functions that causes impairment
Complex Trauma

- Reaction to multiple traumas without resolving them

- In younger people it is also known as Developmental Trauma, as the traumatic response to these events causes delays and distortions in development (more on this later).
Relative Risk of developing a **Traumatic Response** to an event

$$\text{Relative Risk of Developing a Traumatic Response} = (\text{The Traumatic Event(s)} + \text{Vulnerability of the Person}) - (\text{Protective Factors} + \text{Resiliency Gained})$$
The Traumatic Experience

- The Frequency
- Intensity
- Duration
- Injury?
- Perpetrator
  - Stranger
  - Known party
    - Violation of trust
    - Inescapability
    - Complex relationship
The Vulnerability of the Person

- **Age**
  - Before 5, elderly (both for physical and emotional vulnerability)
- **Prior trauma**
- **Other issues that diminish a person’s “sense of self”**
  - Mental illness
  - Learning disability or other impairment in school
  - Substance use disorder
  - Homelessness, poverty
  - Embattled group (Native American, LGBTQ, African American, war refugee, immigrant fleeing danger)
Presence of Protective Factors

• 40 Developmental Assets*
  • External Assets
  • Internal Assets

• How many do you need?
• Which ones are the most important?
Resiliency Gained by the Person

• Experiences have been overcome
  • Success in facing challenges, stresses

• Perspective on the events

• Ability to predict when another challenge will appear
  • Psychological rehearsal
  • Building up one’s abilities to face predictable challenge
  • Philosophical/religious perspective on stress, challenges

• Ability to balance deficits with strengths
  • “I may be _____, but I am really good at ______”

• Resiliency is almost always developed as part of a supportive relationship
  (many relationships can serve as the platform)
How does this equation work for most homeless people?

- How many traumas have they had?
- How vulnerable are they to a new trauma?
- How many protective factors do they have?
- How much resiliency have they developed in their life?
What happens when a person is traumatized?

- Alarm and alert systems are activated
- Memory systems are overwhelmed with intense stimulation
  - If it happens once, the memory can be burned into their brain for many years
  - If it happens over and over, the memory system becomes overwhelmed and has trouble remembering the specific events
- The body’s ability to return the mind to its restful state is impacted
  - If it happens once, it can take a while for the person to recover
  - If it happens over and over, the person may not be able to return to a restful state—its “SET POINTS” are bent
We have 3 Alarm/Arousal Systems in our Brain

• Reticular Activating Formation (RAF)
• Hypothalamic Pituitary Adrenal system (HPA Axis)
• Sympathetic Adrenal Medullary System (SAM)
The Reticular Activating Formation (RAF) is in place at birth.

It acts as the “burglar alarm” for the brain, notifying the nervous system in sensory input is “known” or familiar or “novel” or new.

It then sends out alerts all over the brain (including the HPA axis and the Sympathetic Nervous System).
HPA Axis -

Hypothalamus
Pituitary
Adrenal Axis

Uses
CORTISOL
Sympathetic Nervous System

The “Freeze, Fight, or Flight” response
# Arousal State Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of Time</th>
<th>Extended Future</th>
<th>Days Hours</th>
<th>Hours Minutes</th>
<th>Minutes Seconds</th>
<th>Loss of Sense of Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary secondary Brain Areas</td>
<td>NEOCORTEX Subcortex</td>
<td>SUBCORTEX Limbic</td>
<td>LIMBIC Midbrain</td>
<td>MIDBRAIN Brainstem</td>
<td>BRAINSTEM Autonomic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognition</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Reflex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental State</td>
<td>CALM</td>
<td>AROUSAL</td>
<td>ALARM</td>
<td>FEAR</td>
<td>TERROR</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So, where do you, as a Homeless Services Worker start to understand these folks?

- 4 areas of concern
- Self-regulation
- Self-efficacy or advocacy or mastery
- Executive function
- Wellbeing
This set of FUNCTIONS is necessary for Mental Health and can be seen by the age of 6
This set of FUNCTIONS is necessary for Mental Health and can be seen by the age of 5.
This set of FUNCTIONS is necessary for Mental Health and can be seen by the age of 6.
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- Morality
- Feel physically healthy
- Feel emotionally healthy
- Spirituality
- Purpose, meaning to life
- Belonging

Wellbeing
Thinking back to what I mentioned before about different types of people who are homeless

- Those who are well developed and have had a sudden unfortunate change of luck
- Those who have had a life long set of bad circumstances
- Those who have complex trauma and have had their brain set points changed because of it
What can happen, before age 6, to interfere with these 3 FUNCTIONS?*
Early childhood experiences:
- Neglect
- Abuse
- Loss of continuity of affectionate care
- Excessive stress
- Genetic vulnerability
- Temperamental Problems
- Developmental abnormality
- Physical Injury, Illness

Functions we need by 6:
- Self Regulation
- Self Efficacy
- Executive Function
- Wellbeing
There are even things that can happen before we are born, that impact our FUNCTIONS
Prenatal Risk

- Parental Trauma
- Maternal illness, infection
- Birth trauma
- Exposure to drugs, infections
- Genetic abnormalities

Early childhood risk

- Neglect
- Abuse
- Loss of continuity of affectionate care
- Excessive stress
- Genetic vulnerability
- Temperamental Problems
- Developmental abnormality
- Physical Injury, Illness

Functions we need by 6 years

- Self Regulation
- Self Efficacy
- Executive Function
- Wellbeing
Most of the troubles children have by the age of 6 have to do with difficulties related to these areas.*

What are the specific functions that get disrupted?
Self Regulation

Self Efficacy

Executive Function

Wellbeing

Prenatal Risk
- Parental trauma
- Maternal illness, infection
- Birth trauma
- Exposure to drugs, infections
- Genetic abnormalities

Early childhood risk
- Neglect
- Abuse
- Loss of continuity of affectionate care
- Excessive stress
- Genetic vulnerability
- Temperamental Problems
- Developmental abnormality
- Physical Injury, Illness

Functions we need by 6 years
- Sleep, appetite, moods, aggression, impulsivity, attention, relationship formation, ability to handle sensory input
- Cognitive tasks, physical tasks, communication, problem solving, relationships with peers
- Attention modulation, planning and predicting, salience, learn from experience, hold thoughts in mind
- Physical health, emotional health, spirituality, morality, meaning, purpose

Behavioral Health Problems
To Summarize

- People who are homeless have been through some terrible experiences.
- Some have been traumatized over and over and are constantly on guard for new traumas.
- There are multiple functions that get impacted because of this trauma.
- The areas of impact are Self-Regulation, Mastery, Executive Function, and Wellbeing.
- Take your time, let folks get used to you, more on techniques later.