

Research:

Childhood Trauma Cause of Poor Health in Adults

By Mary Nichols, Psy.D.

My neighbor, my co-worker, and one of my best girlfriends all have something in common – they feel like their body is their enemy. My friend is in her late twenties but tells me she feels like she is getting old. She has dealt with more doctors and pills and mysterious aches and pains than she would expect, given her healthy appearance and the nutritious meals she eats and her meditation practice. My neighbor grows a vegetable garden, takes supplements, and has started to do yoga, but still doesn't feel well. My co-worker has a thriving career, is involved in volunteer work in her community, and takes daily walks with her daughter. But all three of them have had significant health crises in recent years, and they tell me they do not know why it is that, for their entire adult lives, they have been in poor health. They asked me if they are just unlucky.

What is the missing piece of the puzzle? I thought about it, and suddenly remembered coming across an interesting research study in my work

as a psychologist that could explain why these three women have suffered poor health: they all had experiences with childhood trauma.

Types of Childhood Traumatic Experiences

Most of us are not aware that if a person has grown up experiencing multiple childhood traumatic experiences, they have a much higher risk of developing physical and mental illnesses in adulthood? A large research study called the ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences Study) looked at the overall health of thousands of people who either had trauma in childhood or did not, and the results were shocking. These are some of the experiences that were linked with poor health outcomes:

1. Recurrent physical abuse or neglect
2. Recurrent emotional abuse or neglect
3. Sexual abuse
4. An alcohol and/or drug abuser in the household
5. A household member in prison
6. A family member who is chronically

depressed, mentally ill, institutionalized, or suicidal

7. A mother that was treated violently

The greater the number of adverse experiences a person has had before the age of 18, the worse his or her health became in adulthood. Specifically, cancer, stroke, diabetes, bone loss, high blood pressure, and compromised immune function are among the diseases and conditions a person is at risk for when they have had childhood trauma. You can find out your own level of risk using an online calculator at http://www.acesstudy.org/files/ACE_Score_Calculator.pdf.

A child's developing brain is profoundly affected by: the quality of the care given by the adults trusted to raise her or him, the connections they make with these adults, and the experiences they have that cause them to feel fear, or love, anger, or confusion. The brain responds to stressful experiences by releasing cortisol, which can be toxic to a person's physiology and impact the structure and functioning of the brain. If the reaction to the stressful experi-

ence is severe enough, a person can develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

PTSD Symptoms

People with PTSD might find that even more than six months after a traumatic experience, they feel more irritable than they used to be, more hostile or have stronger reactions. They are not able to trust people, are always watching out for danger, isolate themselves from other people and have nightmares, anxiety and depression. They have repeated thoughts about the trauma, and avoid situations that remind them of it.

Children often have somewhat different PTSD symptoms depending on their stage of development. They might remember the different events in a trauma as happening in the wrong order or look at unrelated events as a sign that the trauma was going to happen. Children express themselves through play, and so a common symptom is acting out or repeating a part of the trauma in their play. When they do this, however, it does not help relieve the distress they feel about the experience, and so it is not an effective therapy approach to simply let children play out their trauma without using other methods to address their symptoms. Younger children might be more fearful or aggressive or act without thinking more than is typical for their age.

One way to understand the different reactions people have to trauma is to think about how rescue animals who suffered cruelty at the hands of their former owners might sometimes behave in an unpredictable or aggressive way. Sadly, there can be obvious troubles with behavior, such as biting in fear and not getting along with people or other animals. In addition, the risk for physical disease may grow as well because of the traumatic stress the animal experienced during its early years. It seems that getting a rough start in life can make for a rough road ahead in a lot of ways.

Holistic Treatments

So, what can we do with this information to take steps toward improved mental and physical wellbeing? The answer may be in complementary and alternative medical treatments that address mental health and physical ailments in one integrated and coordinated effort. With the current interest in holistic approaches to mind and body health and wellness, it is clear that practitioners with a focus on integrative approaches are on the right track. Whether a helping professional works with traumatized children or adults with trauma histories to prevent poor health outcomes, a mind-body therapeutic approach can be very effective.

Yoga

Yoga is a powerful way for both children and adults to use the mind-body connection to experience healing from childhood trauma. Beyond the physical health benefits of having a yoga practice, research has found yoga to be very helpful in the treatment of PTSD. There are special certification and training programs for yoga teachers to learn the techniques of Trauma-Sensitive Yoga.

In Trauma-Sensitive Yoga practice, a teacher encourages the person or class to pay close attention to the sensations they feel in their body while they are moving through the different yoga poses and breathing exercises. Teachers do not put their hands on a student to adjust and correct body positioning, as this can trigger traumatic images and memories for a trauma survivor. Instead, participants learn to decide for themselves how it feels best to move with their bodies and to trust their inner experiences and connect mind and body in the present moment.

Mindfulness-Based Therapies and Meditation

Mindfulness, which Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) has defined as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally," is a key part of some therapies for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It also has roots in meditation practice, which can be a helpful way for trauma survivors to heal and enhance wellness. Research suggests that when a person practices mindfulness, by shifting their attention and taking on a nonjudgmental stance,

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this can facilitate learning to react less intensely to distressing thoughts and reminders of a traumatic experience. In therapy that uses mindfulness and meditation, a person can learn to calm their body and cope with painful memories that arise. Specifically, mantra meditation has been shown to be helpful for coping with triggers. Another type of meditation, compassion meditation, is potentially beneficial for people suffering with PTSD, as the practice involves intentionally directing warm and compassionate feelings towards other people. This can have a positive effect on mood and relationships with others.

Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)

There is a highly effective psychotherapy treatment for trauma in children, adolescents, and adults called TF-CBT. A considerable amount of research has been done on the child-specific version of this therapy because a specialized approach is often needed for youngsters. Children are often unable to talk about their trauma,

and overwhelmed by the physiological arousal that happens when they begin to remember what happened to them. They are also too young to have the verbal skills that an adult uses to express difficult thoughts and feelings. So, an important part of this kind of therapy involves the therapist working with the child to learn ways to calm the body and relax. Learning how to do deep breathing is a skill that the child can practice in a fun way. One such technique is where the therapist will have the child lay down on the floor (if the child feels safe and comfortable enough to do this) and set a stuffed teddy bear on his or her belly. If the child is breathing correctly and in a way that will relax the body, they will see the bear move up and down with the breath. This helps to bring awareness to the breath, and the child has a visual (and playful) image of what the body does when it is relaxed. Once the child learns these skills, he or she is often able to calm the body enough to remember and tell the story of the trauma. A trained therapist can help the child write or tell his or her "trauma

narrative" while continuing to practice calming the body, and finding a way to cope, heal, and move on from difficult experiences.

There are so many options for people with childhood trauma to pursue if they wish to heal and overcome the mental and physical health challenges they face. What's more, the mind-body therapeutic approaches are non-invasive in nature and allow one to actively participate in their own healing process.

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