

# HOW THE PAST BECOMES THE PRESENT:

## UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA IN COUPLES AND FAMILIES

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# DEALING WITH THE PANDEMIC AND IMPACT OF TRAUMA

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- Victims and or survivors of domestic violence and or sexual assault experience added anxiety, isolation and stress of the COVID-19 Pandemic
- Resulting in triggers (of trauma)
  - These are memories stored in our physical and emotional selves.
  - The impact(s) of trauma leaves an imprint or memory which resurfaces when we experience the sounds, tastes, feelings or any event that causes the imprint or memory in the first place.
- What are we feeling now? An anxiety and fear of the unknown as a global community
- What does this lead to? Triggering events or resurfacing of personal memories for victims and or survivors of trauma.
- Trauma survivors now experience constant high alert, previous feelings of neglect are triggered, and fears of not having enough or being controlled financially.



# TYPES OF TRAUMA TO RECOGNIZE IN YOURSELF AND OTHERS

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- Acute trauma refers to a one-time event, such as an earthquake, fire, assault, or car accident.
- Chronic trauma: traumatic experiences that are repeated and prolonged, such as ongoing exposure to family or community violence, chronic bullying, or a long-term medical issue.
- Complex trauma: exposure to multiple traumatic events from an early age, often within the caregiving system or without adequate adult support. Examples include abuse and neglect within families, witnessing domestic violence, or experiencing other forms of violence or adversity without adequate adult support.
- Other types of trauma: Historical trauma and racial or race-based trauma.



# THE EXPERIENCE OF STRESS VS. TRAUMA IN OUR CURRENT LIVES?

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- A “Built-in-Alarm” System
- When faced with threat, the emotional brain takes over.
- A stress becomes traumatic when it overwhelms our stress response system.
- A range of acute post-trauma responses are common.
- Trauma reminders, or “triggers,” set off the alarm.
- Responses to triggers may seem out of place and can be misunderstood by others.

# STRESS VS. TRAUMA

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- Knowing how the stress response system works helps us to understand our own stress reactions and those of others.
- It is important to remember that not every threat that sets off the stress response is traumatic, and some amount of stress helps us to learn and grow.
- A stress becomes traumatic when it overwhelms this system that is usually effective at keeping us safe.
- When the system becomes overwhelmed, the emotional brain remains on-alert and continues to send the body instructions to fight, flee, or freeze, even after the threat has passed. Children exposed to trauma may remain in survival mode much of the time, which compromises their ability to learn

# SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK OURSELVES AND TO NOTICE IN CHILDREN?

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## THE STRESS RESPONSE

1. What situations have the potential to activate your stress response system?
2. What situations are more likely set off the stress response in your children?
3. What does the “fight, flight, or freeze” response look like for you in the moment (e.g., sweating, heart racing, yelling, shutting down)?
4. What does the “fight, flight, or freeze” response look like for your children?
5. What does the “fight, flight, or freeze” response look like for us in our parenting role?
6. How might this information about the stress response inform your daily work?

# HOW DOES TRAUMA BECOME TRANSMITTED FROM PARENTS TO CHILDREN IN FAMILIES?

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- Trauma includes childhood hardships:
  - Ex. divorce or separation of parents, death of or estrangement from a parent, emotional, physical or sexual abuse, witnessing violence in the home, exposure to substance abuse in the household or parental mental illness.
- UCLA researcher Dr. Adam Schickedanz found that the long-term behavioral health harms of childhood adversity extend across generations from parent to child.
- Parents who lived through adverse childhood experiences were more likely to report higher levels of aggravation as parents and to experience mental health problems (Schickedanz, 2018)
- However, these mental health and attitude factors only explained about a quarter of the association to their child's elevated behavioral health risks.

# WHAT DOES A FAMILY WHO SUFFERED A TRAUMA LOOK LIKE?

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## **Family life following the event**

- Parents may fear for each other's safety and the safety of their children away from home.
- Family members may experience nightmares or upsetting dreams about the event.
- Fear of another distressing experience happening may affect family life.
- Anger at whoever is believed to have caused the event can often flow on to the affected loved one or the family in general.
- Family members may feel overwhelmed by insecurity or lack of control, or at the thought of having so much to do.
- Family members may not know how to talk to each other. Each person is struggling to understand what has happened and how they feel about it. If talking makes people upset, they will often avoid it.



# HOW DO RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE IN A FAMILY AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT (LOSS, VIOLENCE, THREAT ETC.)

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## **Disruption to family relationships**

- Parents may feel unsure about how to help their children after the crisis.
- Communication breaks down as each family member struggles in their own way to come to terms with what has happened.
- Children don't want to go to school.
- Parents don't want to go to work.
- Household schedules tend to lapse – for example, chores are missed, regular mealtimes are disrupted or recreation is neglected.
- The usual arrangements for household responsibilities change. Children may cook meals for a time, parents may feel unable to do tasks, or children may not want to be alone.

# HELPFUL STRATEGIES FOR RECOVERY FROM TRAUMA

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- Establish safety first; couples and families who experience violence in the home including domestic violence must seek counseling separately. It is paramount that a survivors of violence including children are safe from any future threat of violence and must be protected during the process of counseling.
- Prepare the family members to go through a period of stress and cut back on unnecessary demands to conserve everyone's energy.
- Communication: make sure each family member lets the others know what is going on for them and how to help them.
- Plan regular time out and maintain activities you enjoyed before – even if you don't much feel like it
- Keep track of your family's progress in recovery and what has been achieved.



# COUPLES AND FAMILIES WITH TRAUMA

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Looking at the whole picture:

- Explore what happened in a specific incident or experience and *why* it happened.
- Looking at each person's life and personal history means understanding what they bring to the relationship from those life events and the  coping skills  they developed.
- What is the impact of these coping skills on the distress happening in their current relationship?
- Couples can then see new ways to repair rifts, rebuild trust, and re-develop and strengthen communication.

# THE MYTH OF BEING “DAMAGED GOODS”

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We don't believe people are “broken” or “need fixing”. They just need to develop different, healthier coping mechanisms that work for their current relationship or who they are as individuals.

# WHAT QUESTIONS DO WE HAVE ABOUT FAMILIES/COUPLES WITH TRAUMA?

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- What got triggered in you when you shut down or checked out of your relationship?
- What made it feel impossible to hear what your partner was saying?
- Was your partner really criticizing you?
- Did your partner's words remind you of a familiar past feeling?
- Did something trigger a body memory of fear reminding you when you were criticized in the past?

# WHY RELATIONSHIPS ARE CHALLENGING FOR TRAUMA SURVIVORS?

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- Frequent criticism of oneself for struggling to connect with others.
- It seems impossible to become vulnerable enough (and stay safe) to admit what one wants or needs, let alone share it. Self-imposed isolation has become a way to cope:
- Some feel they should hunker down and handle their struggles themselves.
- Some tell themselves, “Nobody will get it.”
- Often, trauma survivors feel ashamed or weak—like they don’t deserve support or compassion.
- For some, it’s the only way to feel in the past is to be alone.



# LEARNING ABOUT GENERATIONS BEFORE US...

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- **Intergenerational Trauma:** While each generation of a family may experience its own form of trauma, the first experience can be traced back decades.
- People with the highest risk of trauma and those with the most difficulty working through it have experienced their own trauma.
- In a family where there was a trauma in their parents, there was likely trauma in their parents' parents.
- Where trauma has been untreated: in the parent, it is transmitted through the child through the attachment bond (also through the messaging about self and the world, safety, and danger).



# TYPES OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA:

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- Sexual abuse:
  - A parent who experienced sexual abuse is surprised and feels powerless once again when their own child suffers sexual abuse. They aim to protect their child. However, the perpetrator is the same perpetrator from which they suffered their own abuse. They experienced dissociation (which is an experience of outside total awareness) preventing action and feeling paralyzed.
  - People who experience abuse often don't understand how the abuse may occur again in their own family.
  - Results in a cycle of self-blame, depression, and suicidal thinking.

# TYPES OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA (CONT.):

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- Neglect and in the internal resources children gain or don't gain as a result of their parents.
  - If gained, there is a general sense that the world is OK and a general sense that one is able to trust oneself and one's perception of reality.
  - Not having this ability or these resources will affect not only how a person interacts with others but how one cope's with events that overwhelm their internal experience of control.
  - And each interaction affects families in the time of parenting which then impacts children.

# LOOKING AHEAD TO HEALING FROM TRAUMA...

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- Embrace the traditions that make sense for one's family now and into the future.
- Interrupt Unhelpful Family Communication Patterns.
- Understand what is being said and not said in the family both current and past trauma.
- Learn what patterns are being repeated In the present from previous generations.
- Interrupt communication that heightens stress and disrupts connection.

# THE POWER OF THE STORY...

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- When parents tell their stories and develop a story-telling culture within their families, younger generations process the family's trauma history.
- Younger generations are then able to make choices about how they want to incorporate the family's history into their present and future.
- They can and may know that trauma is an acceptable topic of conversation within the family.
- By leading, parents signal to younger generations that they can process the family's trauma history.

# THANK YOU

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“When I stand before thee at the day's end, thou shalt see my scars and know that I had my wounds and also my healing.” –

Rabindranath Tagore

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