



NHS Fife Department of Psychology

Understanding Complex Trauma and Complex-PTSD



Help Yourself @ moodcafe.co.uk



What is Psychological Trauma?

The word trauma means wound. In the past, we only used it to talk about physical injuries and the things that caused them. Today, we also know that some events can cause psychological problems, even if we aren't physically harmed. These traumatic events could be things like:

- A physical or sexual assault
- A road traffic accident
- A natural disaster

Traumatic events are usually unexpected and highly distressing and leave us feeling out-of-control and overwhelmed. Sometimes they can leave us with an 'emotional shock' or psychological trauma. This often includes difficulties like:

- Unwanted memories, flashbacks or nightmares of the event
- Avoiding any reminders of the event
- Feeling unusually tense, irritable or 'on edge'

It's important to know that these can all be normal responses to trauma. However, if they continue for more than a few months they might be a sign of a problem like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). If this is the case, professional support may be helpful. See the handout 'Coping with Trauma' on the Moodcafé website (www.moodcafe.co.uk) for more information about trauma and PTSD.

What is Complex Trauma and Complex-PTSD?

There's no such thing as a *simple* trauma. However, the types of trauma mentioned above are usually one-off, unexpected events. These are sometimes called a Type 1 Trauma. Unfortunately, some people also experience multiple traumas, over long periods of time. Often these can start in childhood. They can include:

- Child physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Child neglect
- Domestic abuse
- Torture

These events can be especially difficult because they're caused by people. Often, these people can be family members, or others that we should be able to trust. Usually, they have some power or control over us too. This can leave us feeling that we're unable to escape the situation, no matter what we do. We call this type of trauma a Complex Trauma or Type 2 Trauma. This type of trauma can lead to extra problems like:

- Difficulties with sense of self
- Difficulties controlling overwhelming feelings
- Difficulties in relationships

This extra set of difficulties is sometimes called Complex-PTSD. It's important to understand that often this is a normal response to an abnormal situation. Understanding more about the causes of Complex-PTSD can help to make this clearer.

The Causes of Complex Trauma

As children we all have basic needs. Some of these are obvious, like the need for food and clothes. We also have some basic psychological needs. These include the need to feel:

- Loved and accepted
- Safe to explore the world and meet other people
- Supported when we get into trouble or need help
- Routine and structure

Our parents and carers are supposed to meet these needs for us in our early life. If this happens, we learn to do it for ourselves as adults. However, if we miss out on these basic rights to care we can struggle later in life. This can be especially difficult as children, because we're designed to depend on our carers to survive. We need them, no matter how they treat us. This can be confusing to children who might not run away or tell others. It can become 'normal' and we might grow up to blame ourselves for what happened, or believe that we deserved it.

Even if we had happy, loving childhoods, Complex Trauma later in life can still overwhelm us. Adults have basic psychological needs too, and situations like domestic abuse or torture infringe on them. Over time, it can change the way we think, feel and behave, and can lead to problems like those in childhood trauma survivors. Of course, some of us experience traumas in childhood and in adult life, or over the course of our lives. We know that the more traumas we experience, the more severe our problems are likely to be. But that doesn't mean we can't recover.

The Extra Symptoms of Complex PTSD: A Closer look

The extra difficulties of Complex-PTSD are important to understand. They often exist because we never had the chance to learn more helpful ways of coping. In fact, many common problems actually started out as ways of coping – they often just don't work as well for us as adults. Trauma affects everyone differently; these are just some common reactions.

Difficulties with Sense of Self (self-concept)

Complex Trauma affects way we think, feel and behave towards ourselves. We may come to believe unhelpful things like we are 'bad', 'worthless' and 'a failure' because that's what we're told or how we're made to feel by others. Over time, we might go along with this and start to act it out towards ourselves. Often, this makes the situation more bearable, and helps us to feel more in control, because it feels like we only need to change ourselves. When we can't change ourselves, we might start to believe that we deserve to be treated this way, criticise ourselves, or even start to punish ourselves. Over time, this can contribute to a sense of shame that makes it feel like others were right all along. We might think, feel and behave very differently at times and feel as though we don't really know ourselves.

Difficulties with Overwhelming feelings (emotional dysregulation)

If we grow up in a safe, loving environment where adults respond to us in healthy ways, then we learn healthy ways to manage our emotions. We learn that unpleasant emotions are usually temporary, that there are effective ways to manage them, and people will help us if we get too distressed. However, if we experience any kind of mistreatment from

adults (as in abuse) or we are left to cope alone (as in neglect), then we never get the right environment to learn how to manage our emotions. This usually leaves people completely overwhelmed and can lead to less healthy means of coping such as self-harm, substance abuse and aggression. These usually start as ways of managing our feelings, but quickly turn into problems in their own right. This makes it harder to deal with our feelings in the long-term.

Sometimes, people have tried and failed so many times to manage their emotions that they learn to numb themselves from feeling anything. When this happens, people say they feel zoned out, like a robot, or even dead inside. This is a long-term effect of suppressing our emotions, known as dissociation. Dissociation can become a problem when it becomes an automatic, involuntary response because it tends to block out pleasant emotions too, and can get in the way of normal functioning and relationships.

Difficulties in Relationships

If our carers have betrayed us in the past then it makes sense that we might have trouble trusting others, especially if they try to get too close. Instead, we might feel that it's better to keep them at arm's length, to attack first, or to completely avoid them. Many survivors of Complex Trauma report that they feel separate and unable to connect with others because of this. On the other hand, we might feel like we can't cope alone, and that we always need someone else to feel safe. In either case, Complex Trauma often teaches people ways of thinking about, and relating to others that can make it difficult to have healthy relationships.

Getting Help

In this section we've listed some sources of support. It's important to know that effective treatments for Complex Trauma exist. For many people, counselling or therapy can be helpful. However, there's no right or wrong way to get help. A good starting place is often your GP, who can recommend specialist mental health services or voluntary sector organisations.

Moodcafé

The moodcafé website was created by the NHS Fife Psychology Department and contains lots of useful information and advice, plus directions to other good quality websites.

Website: <http://www.moodcafe.com>

Books:

Kennerly, H. (2009) **Overcoming Childhood Trauma**. Robinson Publishing. ISBN: 9781841190815

Self-help book for childhood trauma

Boon, S., van der Hart, O., & Steele, K. (2011). **Coping with Trauma-related Dissociation: Skills Training for Patients and Therapists**. ISBN: 039370646X

Self-help book for dissociation

Ainscough, C., & Toon, K. (2000) **Breaking Free Workbook: Practical Help for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse**. Sheldon Press. ISBN: 0859698041

Self-help book for childhood sexual abuse

Davis, L. (1990) **The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse**. Perennial (Harper Collins). ISBN: 0060964375

Self-help book for Childhood Sexual Abuse

National and International Organisations:

Samaritans

Confidential telephone support for anyone in crisis 24 hours a day.

Tel: 08457 909090

Website: <http://www.samaritans.org>

Breathing Space

Confidential mental health helpline (6pm-2am).

Tel: 0800 838587

Website: <http://breathingspace.scot/>

Trauma Counselling Line Scotland

Free national telephone counselling service for those affected by childhood abuse of any type. Focus on BME communities.

Tel: 08088 020406

Website: <http://www.health-in-mind.org.uk/services/counselling/tcls.html>

The National Association for People Abused in Childhood

National charity and support line. Weekdays 10.00am-9.00pm.

Tel: 0800 085 3330 free from landlines, 3, Orange and Virgin mobile phones or 0808 801 0331 free from O2, T-Mobile and Vodafone mobile phones.

Website: <http://www.napac.org.uk/>

Rape and Abuse Line

Freephone helplines for men and women who have been affected by rape and/or abuse.

Mon-Fri: 7pm-10pm (answered by women) 0808 800 0123

Mon and Wed only: 7pm-10pm (answered by men) 0808 800 0122

Website: <http://www.rapeandabuseline.co.uk/>

Survivor Scotland

National government-supported strategy organisation for survivors of childhood abuse

Website: <http://www.survivorscotland.org.uk/>

1 in 6

Advice and support for male survivors.

Website: <https://1in6.org/>

Local Organisations (Fife):

Kingdom Abuse Survivors Project

Support, advice and counselling for abuse survivors in Fife

Tel: 01592 644217

Website: <http://www.kasp.org.uk>

Safe Space

Support, advice and counselling for abuse survivors in Fife

Tel: 01383 739084

Website: <http://www.safe-space.co.uk>

Fife Rape & Sexual Assault Centre

Support, advice and counselling for sexual abuse survivors. Tel: 01592 642336

Website: <http://www.frasac.org.uk/>



Visit moodcafe.co.uk
for more helpful resources

