

BEXART HUB

Trauma, Attachment and the Body

Understanding trauma and attachment

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Understanding trauma and attachment is essential for promoting healing and recovery. Trauma can have long-lasting effects on individuals, impacting their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Attachment theory provides valuable insights into how early relationships shape our ability to cope with stress and form healthy connections.

Trauma is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, causing lasting adverse effects on their mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being. It results from exposure to an event or series of events that are emotionally painful, psychologically distressing, or life-threatening. Trauma is not defined by the event itself, but by the individual's subjective experience of the event and its lasting impact. These experiences often involve a sense of helplessness, loss of control, and a threat to one's safety or the safety of others. The effects of trauma can be profound and far-reaching, affecting various aspects of a person's life and overall functioning.

Trauma has significant effects on our bodies, primarily through the activation of the stress response system. When faced with a traumatic event, the body enters a state of heightened alert, triggering the "fight, flight, or freeze" response. This involves the release of stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, which prepare the body to either confront or escape from the perceived threat. Chronic or prolonged exposure to trauma can lead to dysregulation of the stress response system, resulting in various physical symptoms such as fatigue, sleep disturbances, chronic pain, digestive issues, and a weakened immune system. Additionally, trauma can alter brain structure and function, particularly in areas responsible for memory, emotion regulation, and executive functioning. These changes can contribute to difficulties with attention, concentration, impulse control, and emotional stability.

Healing from trauma is a complex and an individualised process that requires time, patience, and self-compassion. There is no one size fits all approach to healing, as each person's journey is unique and influenced by various factors. Effective strategies for healing from trauma may include seeking professional therapy, practicing mindfulness and relaxation techniques, engaging in creative expression, and connecting with supportive communities. Healing from trauma involves processing difficult emotions, challenging negative beliefs, and developing healthy coping mechanisms to manage triggers. It is also essential to prioritise self-care and engage in activities that promote well-being and a sense of safety and security.

Attachment theory, pioneered by John Bowlby, offers valuable insights into how early childhood experiences shape our relationships throughout life. Bowlby proposed that infants have an innate need to form a close bond with a primary caregiver, typically the mother, for survival and emotional well-being. He likened the importance of maternal care to the necessity of vitamin D for bone development, emphasising its crucial role in healthy psychological development. Bowlby hypothesised that the quality of this early relationship serves as a template for future relationships,

influencing our expectations, behaviors, and emotional responses in intimate connections.

Mary Ainsworth's "Strange Situation" study further illuminated the dynamics of attachment by observing how infants respond to separation and reunion with their mothers. Ainsworth identified four primary attachment styles: secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganised. Securely attached infants demonstrate confidence in their caregiver's availability and responsiveness, using them as a secure base from which to explore the world. Anxiously attached infants exhibit clinginess and distress upon separation, often displaying ambivalence upon reunion. Avoidant infants show little emotional response to separation or reunion, appearing emotionally distant from their caregivers. Disorganised attachment, often associated with inconsistent or frightening parenting, is characterised by contradictory behaviors and a lack of coherent strategy for seeking comfort. As Mary Ainsworth highlighted in her study of families with infant children, "differences in infants' attachment styles are dependent on the mother's behavior during a critical period of development," underscoring the profound impact of early care giving experiences on attachment security.

Bowlby's work suggests that our adult relationships are deeply rooted in our childhood experiences with maternal care. Individuals with secure attachment histories tend to form healthy, trusting relationships characterised by intimacy, empathy, and mutual support. In contrast, those with insecure attachment histories may struggle with issues such as fear of intimacy, difficulty trusting others, and a tendency to repeat unhealthy relationship patterns. Understanding attachment theory can provide valuable insights into our own relationship dynamics and offer a framework for fostering healthier connections with others.

Attachment theory suggests that early attachment experiences profoundly shape subsequent relationships and emotional development. Bowlby proposed that attachment influences our ability to focus mentally, our awareness of feelings and emotional states, our capacity to self-soothe during stress, and our resilience in the face of misfortune. Furthermore, attachment experiences can influence the structure and function of the developing brain.

Implicit memory refers to the unconscious or automatic recall of past experiences, including sensory inputs like smells, sounds, and sights. During a traumatic event, the brain records these sensory details in implicit memory. Subsequently, any combination of these implicit memories can trigger a stress response, even without conscious awareness of the original trauma.

The changes in the brain resulting from trauma-related implicit memories can have long-lasting effects, influencing adult social and personal interactions.

Understanding trauma and attachment is crucial for promoting healthy healing and recovery. By recognising the impact of early attachment experiences on subsequent relationships, emotional regulation, and brain development, we can better support individuals in overcoming the effects of trauma.

It's important to consider the similarities between depression and the effects of the fight, flight, or freeze response. Depression is often described as a disease caused

by prolonged periods of stress. Therefore, it's essential to question whether individuals experiencing symptoms of depression, stress, or anxiety may actually be stuck in a fight, flight, or freeze response. By exploring this possibility, we can gain a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of their distress and tailor interventions accordingly.