

# THE IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL TRAUMA

Ross Cohen, LPC, CADCI

## Emotional Trauma

The term trauma typically calls to mind major events that cause physical damage, such as a serious accident, violent attack, or natural disaster. More and more though, people have come to recognize the *emotional impact* of these types of events, which is known as **emotional trauma**. Research also validates that **emotionally painful experiences that occur without physical damage also fit the criteria for emotional trauma**. Examples include abuse, neglect, humiliation, relationship breakup, or the death of a loved one.

## Trauma vs. Stress

As a point of reference, **emotional trauma can be compared to stress**. Both trauma and stress are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation and they both cause your nervous system to prepare to take action through the “fight or flight” response.

With stressful situations, your nervous system is briefly impacted, but naturally returns to balance within a relatively short period of time. A traumatic experience, on the other hand, is more extreme in that it overwhelms your capacity to cope with a given situation, causing your nervous system to be thrown out of balance. If this trauma-induced imbalance is not resolved, it lingers. **This is what accounts for the ongoing after-effects of trauma, such as anxiety and depression, panic attacks and fearfulness, sleep disturbances, and relationship problems.**

## Sensitivity to Trauma

**Various factors cause some people to be more susceptible to the after-effects of trauma than others.** Since younger children are more vulnerable and less able to understand disturbing events, childhood trauma often impacts them more severely. If you have a shy or sensitive temperament, you may be impacted by, and react more strongly to, traumatic experiences (some people are genetically less resilient to trauma than others). Also, traumatic experiences that occur earlier in your life tend to make you more vulnerable to future traumas. This often results in greater sensitivity and more severe reactions to subsequent trauma.

## Single Incident vs. Chronic Trauma

**Traumatic experiences can occur as a single incident or may have been a chronic experience.** Single incident traumas include situations such as a car accident, experiencing (or witnessing) an assault, surgery, or a rejection. Chronic

trauma manifests as a repetitive experience or pattern. For example, a 7 year old boy's parents get a divorce. His father moves far away. He lives with his mother but she consistently chooses her career, social life, and boyfriends over him. He begins to struggle with the pattern of abandonment and rejection by both parents and eventually starts to experience depression, anger, and low self-esteem.

### **Repetitive Nature of Trauma**

**Often times, unbeknownst to you, early traumas tend to get repeated in similar ways later in life.** This is especially true of more subtle, forgotten, or repetitive traumas that are less obvious. For example, you may have had the experience of reacting very strongly to a difficult circumstance - such as a relationship breakup or the way a co-worker treats you - but not understanding why. In these cases, there typically is a childhood trauma that is activating and fueling your current reaction. In the above example of the 7 year old boy, if his symptoms go untreated, they will likely follow him into adulthood, creating potentially significant emotional, behavioral, and relationship problems for him.

### **Subjective Nature of Trauma**

**A traumatic reaction is a completely subjective experience** - different people interpret and react to the same types of situations very differently. It is not the incident that determines whether something is traumatic to you or not, but rather your personal experience of it. For example, two women can go through a similarly painful relationship breakup at the same time. Six months later, one may be happily involved in a new relationship, while the other is stuck feeling rejected, depressed, worthless, and having sleep difficulties. This person likely suffered a similar type of emotional trauma at a younger age (such as rejection by a parent) that is unresolved and being re-activated.

### **Trauma and Negative Beliefs**

**Traumatic experiences strongly influence your perceptions about yourself and your life.** When a person encounters a traumatic situation, they make meaning out of the experience. In this way, traumatic experiences both create and reinforce negative beliefs. For example, if a parent is verbally or physically abusive to their child, he or she may develop the belief, "I'm not safe." If a parent ignores their child, he or she may conclude, "I'm not lovable." Powerful beliefs such as these are often an underlying source of anxiety, depression, and many other types of symptoms.

## Trauma as a Source of Symptoms

**Current research indicates that trauma may be at the root of a broad spectrum of problems.** When trauma goes untreated, it can impact all aspects of a person, manifesting as a variety of different symptoms that may obviously, or not so obviously, relate to the initial trauma.

### Physical Symptoms

Trauma impacts the physical body by decreasing a sense of trust and safety, which increases **fear and worry**. Common symptoms include a **racing heart, hyper-vigilance, exaggerated startle response, sleep difficulties, headaches, increased stress, change in appetite, low energy, and sexual dysfunction**. Research also links trauma with physical health problems.

### Emotional Symptoms

Trauma is at the root of some of the most painful symptoms, including **anxiety, fearfulness, phobias, worry, and panic attacks**. **Depression, hopelessness, excessive guilt, and shame are very common**. Feeling **trapped, powerless, and inadequate**, as well as struggling to overcome **grief** is also typically related to emotional trauma.

### Cognitive Symptoms

Trauma plays a major role in shaping your belief system and typically **underlies self-sabotaging thinking**. It's not uncommon to also experience difficulties with **concentration, memory, decision making, and being easily distracted** due to emotional trauma.

### Behavioral Problems

Due to the discomfort of trauma, many people feel a strong attraction to mask their symptoms through **addictive and compulsive behaviors with alcohol, drugs, food, sex, gambling, and relationships**.

### Relationship Issues

Trauma typically occurs within the context of relationships (e.g., abuse, rejection, abandonment, humiliation, criticism, lack of support) and these issues often get repeated, triggered, or played out in your intimate relationships. Common symptoms include **arguments, conflict, and hostility; isolation and withdrawal; sexual problems, extreme fear of abandonment and rejection, and attempts to control others**.

## **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that develops after a terrifying event in which physical harm occurred or was threatened. During the traumatic incident that caused the PTSD, the person experiences intense fear, a sense of helplessness, and horror. People suffering from PTSD typically **startle easily, experience emotional numbing and loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy, and struggle with insomnia, flashbacks, and nightmares**. PTSD often co-occurs with **anxiety, depression, and substance abuse** and can be the source of **painful relationship problems**.

## **Spirituality**

When unresolved traumas are continually triggered, they pull your attention to the past, making it difficult to be present-centered. Likewise, painful trauma makes it challenging to fully accept life just as it is. **Emotional trauma naturally increases fear, leading to a more outwardly focused orientation, leaving less energy for inner connection with your true nature**. Trauma symptoms may keep you identified with your personal pain, making it more difficult to relate to the interconnectedness of all things and to stay focused on your greater life purpose.

## **Trauma Counseling**

Experiencing trauma clearly has its disadvantages, but healing trauma can open you up to deep transformation and personal growth. As your trauma heals, it's not uncommon to experience a deeper sense of compassion, empathy, and intimacy in your relationships. You may also experience a greater sense of wisdom, acceptance, and appreciation for life. **Healing emotional trauma is especially powerful because it impacts all aspects of your personhood – physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, relationships, and spirituality**.

Feel free to call me today at (503) 887-3309 or email me at [mail@ross-cohen.com](mailto:mail@ross-cohen.com) to book a counseling session or to set up a FREE 30-minute consultation.