

Complex Trauma in Children and Adolescents

Jennifer Wilgocki, MS LCSW
Adolescent Trauma Treatment Program
Mental Health Center of Dane County, Inc.

Today ' s questions:

What is complex trauma?

What helps kids with complex trauma get better?



Trauma Principle #1

If everything is trauma,
nothing is trauma.

Trauma Principle #2

It is the child's experience
of the event, not the event
itself, that is traumatizing.

Trauma Principle #3

If we don't look for or
acknowledge trauma in the lives
of children and adolescents, we
end up chasing behaviors and
limiting the possibilities for
change.

Trauma Principle #4

The behavioral and emotional adaptations that maltreated children make in order to survive are brilliant, creative solutions, and are personally costly.

Trauma Principle #5

If you don't ask, they won't tell.

Trauma Principle #6

Since trauma = chaos,
Structure = healing

Diagnosis

Acute Stress Disorder:

- One or more symptom(s) lasts for a minimum of 2 days and a maximum of 4 weeks
- Must include 3 or more symptoms of dissociation

PTSD:

- One or more symptom(s) occurs more than 1 month post event

Symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

1. Re-experiencing

Imagery	Misperceiving danger
Nightmares	Distress when cued
Body memories	

2. Avoidance

Numbing out	Diminished interest
Dissociation	Self isolation
Detachment	

3. Increased arousal

Anxiety	Sleep disturbances
Hypervigilance	Irritability or quick to anger
Startle response	Physical complaints

Limitations of PTSD Diagnosis

- Conceptualized from an adult perspective
- Identified as diagnosis via Vietnam vets and adult rape victims
- Focuses on single event traumas

Limitations of PTSD Diagnosis

- Fails to recognize chronic/multiple/on-going traumas
- Is not developmentally sensitive
- Most traumatized children do not meet full diagnostic criteria

Complex Trauma

- new concept, new language
- also called “Developmental Trauma Disorder” (van der Kolk, 2005)
- Complex Trauma is:
 - the experience of multiple traumas
 - developmentally adverse
 - often within child’s caregiving system
 - rooted in early life experiences
 - responsible for emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and meaning-making disturbances

Complex Trauma

Six Domains of Complex PTSD

1. Affect and impulse regulation problems
2. Attention and consciousness
3. Self perception
4. Relations with others
5. Somatization
6. Alterations in systems of meaning

1st Domain - Affect and Impulse Regulation

Affect intensity - easily triggered, slow to calm

Tension-reducing behaviors - AODA, self injury

Suicidal preoccupation

Sexual involvement or sexual preoccupation

Excessive risk taking

Excessive Risk Taking

Copy-Right Image Removed

2nd Domain - Attention

Amnesia - memory loss or gaps

Dissociative episodes - spacing out or fantasy world

Depersonalization - “not me”

3rd Domain - Self Perception

Ineffectiveness and permanent damage - can't do anything right, something is wrong with me

Guilt and responsibility/shame

Nobody can understand - alienation, feeling different

Minimizing - "pain competition" or denial

4th Domain - Relationships

Inability to trust

Re-victimization - reenactment

Victimizing others - reenactment

4th Domain - Relationships

Copy-Right Image Removed

5th Domain - Somatization

Chronic pain - no origin, repeat doctor visits, school nurse

Digestive complaints

Cardiopulmonary symptoms

Sleep problems

6th Domain - Meaning Making

Foreshortened future

Loss of previously sustaining beliefs

Justice and fairness

Traumatic Expectations of the World

Copy-Right Image Removed

What helps kids with complex trauma get better?

Evidence-based trauma-informed assessments

Evidence-based trauma-informed treatment

- exposure and non-exposure treatments
- group, individual, family treatments
- clinic, school, or home based

What helps kids with complex trauma get better?

Exposure-based treatments:

Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) Jaycox

Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) Cohen, Mannarino, Deblinger
tfcbt.musc.edu

What helps kids with complex trauma get better?

Non-exposure based treatments:

Trauma Adaptive Recovery Group Education and Therapy (TARGET) Ford

Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress (SPARCS)
DeRosa et. al

What helps kids with complex trauma get better?

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

www.nctsn.org

jennifer.wilgocki@mhcdc.org

608-280-2537