

Complex Trauma

The term *complex trauma* describes both children's exposure to multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive, interpersonal nature, and the wide-ranging, long-term impact of this exposure.

These events are severe and pervasive, such as abuse or profound neglect. They usually begin early in life and can disrupt many aspects of the child's development and the very formation of a self. Since they often occur in the context of the child's relationship with a carer, they interfere with the child's ability to form a secure attachment bond. Many aspects of a child's healthy physical and mental development rely on this primary source of safety and stability.

General Information on Complex Trauma

Many children with complex-trauma histories suffer a variety of traumatic events, such as physical and sexual abuse, witnessing domestic and community violence, separation from family members and revictimisation by others. Complex trauma can have devastating effects on a child's physiology; emotions; ability to think, learn and concentrate; impulse control; self-image and relationships with others. Across the life span, complex trauma is linked to a wide range of problems, including addiction, chronic physical conditions, depression and anxiety, self-harming behaviours and other psychiatric disorders.

Beyond the consequences for the child and family, these problems carry high costs for society. For example, a child who cannot learn may grow up to be an adult who cannot hold a job. A child with chronic physical problems may grow up to be a chronically ill adult. Children who grow up learning to hate themselves may become adults with eating disorders or substance addictions.

Children whose families and homes do not provide consistent safety, comfort and protection may develop ways of coping that allow them to survive and function day-to-day. For instance, they may be overly sensitive to the moods of others, always watching to figure out what the adults around them are feeling and how they will behave. They may withhold their own emotions from others, never letting them see when they are afraid, sad or angry. These kinds of learned adaptations make sense when physical and emotional threats are ever-present. As a child grows up and encounters situations and relationships that are safe, these adaptations are no longer helpful, and may in fact be counterproductive and interfere with the capacity to live, love and be loved.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) (n.d.). Complex trauma [Global Edit]. Retrieved 28 July 2016 from www.nctsnet.org