

# **UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO CHILDHOOD TRAUMA**

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## **TRAUMA AND DEVELOPMENT**

- **Effects of trauma during critical periods of development**
- **Long-term implications of attachment disruption and maltreatment**
- **New infant brain research and its implications for understanding Indigenous wellbeing, decision-making, intervention, child protection and issues faced by traumatised children in detention**

## **TRAUMATIC EVENT**

- **Something that is threatening to the self or someone close to you, accompanied by fear, horror, or helplessness**

– American Psychiatric Association, DSM

## **TRAUMA IN INFANCY AND CHILDHOOD**

- **Psychic trauma occurs when a sudden unexpected intense external experience overwhelms the individuals' coping and defensive operations, creating the feeling of utter helplessness**

– Lenore Terr (1987)

## **DEVELOPMENT IN INFANCY**

- **Neuropsychological processes**
- **Affect regulation**
- **Representations of self, other**
- **Attachment Style**
- **Adaptation to Stress**
- **Capacity for intimacy and empathy**

## **INFANT CAPACITIES**

- **Programmed for social interaction**
- **Ability to communicate emotional experience**
- **Move towards development and self-regulation**

## **EARLY BRAIN DEVELOPMENT**

- **Promoted by secure attachment**
- **Sharing of positive affective states**
- **Carer maintains optimal level of arousal**
- **Mutually attuned synchronized interactions promote affective development**

## **EXPERIENCE AND DEVELOPMENT**

- Experience activates specific neuronal connections
- Sharing positive emotional states with a caretaker promotes brain growth and the development of regulatory capacities
- Secure attachment promotes neurobiological functioning, emotional regulation and adaptation to stress

## **NEUROBIOLOGY OF ATTACHMENT**

- **Secure attachment promotes brain growth**
- **Attachment relationship regulates emotional experience and level of arousal**
- **Attachment figure acts as an external neurobiological regulator**

## **NEUROBIOLOGY OF ATTACHMENT**

- **SECURE ATTACHMENT – optimal level of arousal**
- **AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT – downplaying of emotional display**
- **AMBIVALENT ATTACHMENT – heightened emotional display**
- **DISORGANISED ATTACHMENT – high arousal and stress**

## **ATTACHMENT DISORGANISATION**

- **Associated with trauma and abuse**

- **Lack of effective strategy for dealing with caretaker**
- **High levels of stress and related hormones**
- **Defensive exclusion of understanding of caretaker**
- **Excessive use of dissociation and opioid related states**

## **ATTACHMENT DISORGANISATION**

- **Poor development of internal state language**
- **Poor reflective function**
- **Deficits in empathy**
- **Contradictory representations of self and other**
- **Dysregulation of behaviour, affect and impulses**

## **NEUROCHEMISTRY OF ATTACHMENT**

- **Resting mutual gaze – endogenous opioids**
- **Regulation of neurotransmitters – dopamine and serotonin**
- **Regulation of stress hormones – noradrenalin, cortisol**

## **SPECTRUM OF TRAUMA**

- **Single overwhelming events**
- **Chronic enduring stressors**
- **Indirect exposure**

- **Transgenerational trauma**

## **MODERATE STRESSORS**

- **Emotionally unavailable carer - depression, anxiety, bereavement**
- **Parental hostility and anger**
- **Family conflict and domestic violence**
- **Unpredictability and inconsistency**
- **Neglect and stimulus deprivation**

## **EXTREME AND CATASTROPHIC STRESSORS - NCCIP Classification**

- **Loss of attachment figure**
- **Continued physical/sexual abuse**
- **Family overwhelmed - war, displacement, terror**
- **Abandonment and gross neglect**

## **TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA**

- **Repetition of disturbed interactions and patterns of relationships**
- **Repetition of abuse and maltreatment**
- **Issues for abused parents - anxiety, compensation and reparation, envy**
- **Re-enactment of unresolved attachment trauma**

## **NEURODEVELOPMENT AND TRAUMA**

- **Dysregulation of HPA axis functioning - stress system**
- **Altered cortisol pattern - stress hormone**
- **Reduced volume of hippocampus - memory**
- **Reduced volume of corpus callosum - information processing**
- **Potential effects on mood and impulse control, emotional regulation**

## **BRAIN FUNCTION AND EXPERIENCE**

- **STRESS – hyperactive stress response**
- **CHAOS – poor sensory integration, attentional and processing problems**
- **NEGLECT – poor emotional regulation, deficits in processing of socioemotional information and attachment**
- **ABUSE – poor regulation of anger, aggression, impulses, anxiety; deficits in emotional understanding,**

## **Key points in brain development**

- **Optimal development of more complex systems (eg cortex) requires healthy development of less complex systems (eg midbrain and brainstem)**
  - **if state-regulating parts of brain (midbrain and brainstem) develop in less than optimal pattern (eg excessive traumatic experience), this will impact on development of all other brain systems**

**Cortical Modulation of reflexive lower brain responses is age related**

**Cortical modulation**

- **The capacity to moderate frustration, impulsivity, aggression and violent behaviour is age-related**
- **With a set of sufficient motor, sensory, emotional cognitive and social experiences during early childhood, the mature brain develops an ability to tolerate frustration, control impulsivity and channel aggression**

## **Ratio of Modulation: optimal development**

### **Ratio of modulation in optimum development**

- **This ratio indicates the relative “power” of the maturing and mature brain to modulate the more primitive, reactive, reflexive MB and BS**
- **Any disruption to normal development that “overdevelops” MB or BS or “underdevelops” limbic and cortical areas will affect ratio and predispose to aggressive and violent behaviour**

## **Developmental neglect**

### **Developmental neglect**

- **Absence or reduction of key experiences results in poor modulation of impulsivity, immature emotional and behavioural functioning and a predisposition to violence**
- **Ability of maturing brain to modify impulsive and reactive responses in face of stress or frustration is diminished**

## **Persisting fear response: developmental trauma**

### **Persisting fear response**

- **Children raised in violent environments likely to develop extremely active and reactive stress-response apparatus**
- **Most stress-response systems lie in MB or BS**
- **Relative overdevelopment of these areas predisposes to aggressive, impulsive and reactive behaviour**

## **Neglect *and* Trauma**

### **IMPACT OF TRAUMA**

- **Severity of the stressor**
- **Developmental level of the child**
- **Availability and capacity of adult support**

## **Children and Trauma**

- **Trauma in young children impinges on *brain development*, affects their *social maps* and predisposes to emergence of longstanding *post-traumatic stress disorder***
- **Trauma impacts on caregivers and may impair development of secure relationships (*attachment*) between parents and their children**

### **CHILDRENS' RESPONSES TO TRAUMA**

- **Children process and recall acute traumatic events**
- **Persistent high arousal and anxiety**
- **Immediate reactions include regression, clinging, muteness**
- **Traumatic re-enactment in play and behaviour**

## **TRAUMATIC MEMORIES**

- **Paul witnessed the murder of his mother by his father at 18 months**
- **At 24 months he repeatedly reenacts a stabbing murder in play but cannot talk about either parent**
- **At 48 months he gives an accurate verbal account of events**

## **RESPONSES TO THREAT**

- **HYPERAROUSAL – fight or flight response; adrenaline/noradrenaline; sympathetic**
- **DISSOCIATIVE – freeze or play dead response; opioids and dopamine; parasympathetic**

## **TRAUMA SPECIFIC DIAGNOSES**

- **Acute stress responses in infants - dissociation**
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder - traumatic play, fears**
- **Disruptive Behaviour Disorders**
- **Attachment Disorders**

## **TRAUMA AND THE BRAIN**

- **Stress hormones and cortisol are neurotoxic**
- **Sensitised pathways develop in R orbito-frontal brain regions - PTSD**
- **Long lasting impairment in brain regions involved in regulation of the intensity of feelings**
- **Persistent dissociation**

## **CHRONIC TRAUMA**

### **CHRONIC TRAUMA AND DEVELOPMENT**

- **Child adapts to enduring stress according to developmental stage and capacities**
- **Chronic stress will effect all domains of development and neurobiological functioning**
- **Vulnerability is greatest at stages of rapid neurobiological organisation**

### **TYPE 2 TRAUMA - TERR**

- **Adaptation - avoidance, repression, dissociation**
- **Repetition – re-enactment, play, identification**
- **Anxiety - arousal, aggression, self-harm**
- **Self-Concept - depression, guilt, shame**

### **CORE DEFICITS**

### **TRAUMA SYNDROME**

- **Over reaction to trauma associated stimuli**
- **Poor anxiety tolerance**
- **Poor modulation of aggression**
- **Disorganised attachment behaviours, anger towards attachment figures**
- **Poor affect control**
- **Self-destructive behaviours**

### **TRAUMA AND PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT**

## **SEVERE PERSONALITY DISORDER**

- **Syndrome of neurophysiological and psychosocial dysregulation**
- **Symptoms as attempts to reestablish homeostasis**
- **Basis in traumatic early attachment experiences and neurodevelopmental effects of trauma**

## **PERSONALITY DISORDER**

- **Dysregulation of affect and intolerance of anxiety**
- **Limited internal state language**
- **Contradictory representations of self and other**
- **Limited reflective capacity**
- **Unintegrated traumatic memories**

## **NEURODEVELOPMENT IN PD**

- **Limbic irritability**
- **Reduced size of hippocampus**
- **Reduced left temporal lobe development**
- **Reduced left-right integration**
- **Reduced volume of corpus callosum**
- **Decreased blood flow to cerebellar vermis**

## **PREVENTION IN HIGH RISK DYADS**

- Identify maternal history of abuse and trauma
- Identify capacity to think of the infants' needs and inner world
- Look for patterns of identification of infant with a traumatic figure

## **PREVENTION IN HIGH RISK DYADS**

- Interventions focus on improving responsivity and emotional attunement
- Aim at improving understanding of infant needs and changing perceptions of the infant
- Infant -led interventions

## **TRAUMA AND MEMORY**

- **Infants and young children encode trauma in state and emotional memory systems**
- **Verbal recall may occur later**
- **Environmental triggers can recall memories of trauma**
- **Repressed traumatic memories affect ongoing development and functioning**

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## **Parents buffering of social stress – relevance to PTSD**

**Beyond any individual strengths that come to a child with temperament and intellectual capacity at birth, the key lies in**

**the balance of social supports from and for parents. *It lies in the parental capacity to buffer social stress in the lives of children and offer them a positive path in dealing with that stress...***

*Garbarino, 1997*

## **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

***Adults are crucial resources for children attempting to cope with chronic danger and stress. So long as adults are in control of themselves and present children with a role model of calm, positive determination, most children can cope with a great deal of chronic stress associated with community violence. Whilst they may be traumatised by their experiences, the adults around them will be able to serve as a resource and support them in rehabilitative efforts....***

*Garbarino, 1997*

## **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

***However, once adults begin to deteriorate, to decompensate, to panic, children suffer. This is not surprising given the importance of the images of adults contained in children's social maps. Traumatized children need help to recover from their experiences. Emotionally disabled or immobilized adults are unlikely to offer children what they need. Such adults are likely to engage in denial, to be emotionally inaccessible, and are prone to misinterpret children's signals***

*Garbarino, 1997*

## **Impact on adults of fears about child removal?**

- **Trauma impacts on caregivers and may impair development of secure relationships (attachment) between parents and their children**

## **The cost of the Stolen Generations...**

**“The horror of a regime that took young Aboriginal children, sought to cut them off suddenly from all contact with their families and communities, instil in them a repugnance of all things Aboriginal, and prepare them harshly for a life as the lowest level of workers in a prejudiced white community, is still a living legacy amongst many Aboriginals today.”**

– Commission of enquiry into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

## **The cost of the Stolen Generations...**

- **43 of 100 investigated Aboriginal deaths in custody had been subjected to some kind of juvenile separation, often directly responsible for setting in train the events which led to death in adult life.**

– Commission of enquiry into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

## **The Stolen Generations....**

**“Thousands of children throughout Australia have spoken out against the pain they have endured and are still enduring.**

**So have the parents and extended families of the children**

**Whole communities have expressed what it meant to have their families traumatised, their future leadership removed and blown to the four winds.”**

<sup>a</sup> Peter Read, “A rape of the soul so profound”

## **Historical roots of a failed policy**

**“I am strongly of the opinion that if we took these native children when they were small infants...we would educate them for service... and they would do useful work for the community....**

**They should be taken away directly after they are born. If they are in a wurly for a week it is bad for them, but it is fatal for them to remain a year.”**

<sup>a</sup> J Gray, Secretary of SA State Children's Council, evidence before a 1913 Royal Commission.

## **Trauma in the life of contemporary Indigenous Australians**

- **Stories from “Why warriors lie down and die” by Richard Trudgen**
- **And Graham Vimpani in conversation with Boni Robertson a Gurang Gurang woman**

## **Trauma in the life of contemporary Indigenous Australians – Boni Robertson, October 2002**

**“Since December last year I've attended 15 funerals in Brisbane alone, 15 funerals, some of those young people, some of those are elders and**

**no one speaks about it and what I'm noticing now is that people are actually not crying. That is frightening for me and themselves, there is no more tears and it is almost like they've accepted death as an inevitable - well death is an inevitable part of everyone's life but it is almost like they are just accepting it at an early age, like it is a pathology within their lives that while, you know, *no one cries any more because grief and trauma and death have just become such a fundamental part of their daily lives that it doesn't rate the same sort of thing any more....***

## **Trauma in the life of contemporary Indigenous Australians –**

### **Boni Robertson**

**“Grief has become so much a part of our lives that it is not raising the same external emotional traumas, but they are internalising it, that is my concern that people are actually further internalising the grief. Now, if the Government and Australia can recognise that the children of, for example, returned soldiers, if they can recognise that there is trauma that is generated particularly in men returning from Vietnam, where they themselves came back traumatised, so they pass that trauma down to their children and their families and so on and so on.**

## **Trauma in the life of contemporary Indigenous Australians –**

### **Boni Robertson**

**“If we can recognise that for the Vietnam Vets, if we can recognise it for the people from Kosovo, if we can recognise it for the people from - the Taiwanese people, if this country is able, in its capacity to be humanitarian enough to recognise that there is a possibility that younger generations will be traumatised by what they're seeing now, but not apply that same sort of recognition to Indigenous communities in this country, then we really are not serious about reconciliation or proper intervention.**

## **The Stolen Generations....**

**“We the stolen generations are the victims of Australia-wide policies which aimed to separate us from our parents, our family, our neighbourhood, our community, our country and our rightful inheritance as Aboriginal citizens of Australia.**

**We are the victims of a policy which – if it had been successful – would have put an end to Aboriginality for ever. Not just ours – everyone's.**

**And we are still hurting. We must insist that those who are grieving be allowed to heal, whatever the cost.”**

<sup>a</sup> Peter Read, “A rape of the soul so profound”

**What happens to children when.....?**

**You impose on this historical legacy of multiple loss, their present day exposure to family violence, crime, alcohol and substance misuse, and mental illness in their parents.....?**

## **IMPLICATIONS OF NEW BRAIN RESEARCH**

- **Importance of protecting children during critical neurodevelopmental periods**
- **Foundational role of early attachment experiences and psychosocial environment**
- **Protective role of alternate attachment experiences**

## **Graham Vimpani in conversation with Boni Robertson**

**GV:** Until we face up to the demons in our past, including our appropriation of lands and hunting grounds and spiritually significant places that had been owned by others for centuries before we arrived on the scene, true reconciliation will not occur.□

There is an analogy in Christian thought I guess that we need to appropriate for ourselves in this context - conversion - i.e. having a changed world view - will not achieve real change (ie reconciliation) unless it be accompanied by repentance (a sense of sorrow for past wrongs) and forgiveness - both from those we have wronged, however unintended that might have been through our own cultural ignorance - although there was plenty of intended wrong too - and facing up to what we have done so that we can forgive and accept ourselves for what we have done.□

## **Graham Vimpani in conversation with Boni Robertson**

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## **Boni's response..**

**Without dealing with the issues you have raised, reconciliation will always be in the minds of most of our people, nothing other than a empty gesture. All else is simply rhetoric that makes this nation look good but with no real ownership or acknowledgement taking place. For me it is about validation of real human suffering and pain.**

**Validation of a past that we must all own if we can ever go forward peacefully as a country. When I look at the pain in the hearts of so many of our people, I can understand why so many of them get angry and hostile. The trouble is they take most of their angst out on themselves or each other. Such is the art of oppression.**

## **Kevin Gilbert...**

**As Aborigines began to sicken physically and psychologically, they were hit by the full blight of the alien way of thinking. They were hit by the intolerance and uncomprehending barbarism of a people intent only on progress in material terms, a people who never credited that there could be cathedrals of the spirit as well as of stone...**

***It is my belief that Aboriginal Australia underwent a rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues in the minds of most blacks today.***