

# Childhood Trauma Makes Adults Emotionally Vulnerable

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*C.R. writes:* You can read our first post on trauma, [here](#).

One of the factors that might make an adult susceptible to the experience of trauma is if he or she was traumatized in childhood. Many things that seem, on the surface, to be unpleasant but not traumatic, can be very painful, even traumatic, to adults who've lived through childhood trauma.

The basics: Why are children more likely to have a traumatic response to events? Obviously, children tend to be more vulnerable than adults. They have little physical or autonomous power, and must rely on their parents, teachers, or other guardians to protect them.

Children living in unstable or dangerous environments, children who are abused in any way, children who witness abuse or violence, children who are neglected, children of divorce, or children who must endure invasive medical procedures, generally have no power to change their situation.

Even events that we see as ordinary, or at most annoying or difficult, can be traumatic for a child.

The really painful part of all this is that a child can get "stuck" in traumatic response and this can carry through to adulthood.

For example, in some recent interviews, I've spoken with adults who survived the holocaust. One woman mentioned that her first painful memory was when she had to go to the hospital overnight for an operation or treatment of some kind. When she was four, her mother and father took her to the hospital and the nurses took her away from her parents at the hospital door, thinking a "clean break" would be best. She remembers screaming and crying pitifully, and wondering if she were being brought to jail.

Her later traumatic war experiences mirrored her early memory of separation and feelings of abandonment: the worst was being put on a train and sent to England, the last time she ever saw her mother or father. On reflection, this interviewee says some of the younger girls



appeared to cope better with the separation than she did. She remembers crying for days and not eating and having a very hard time adjusting to the change.

After marrying and settling in the United States, she recalls that she found it difficult to put her children in school: she took them to school and then came home and cried. It was only with great effort that she could muster up the energy to get on with her day. On reflection, she realizes that most separations feel traumatic to her, and she often experiences almost unbearable emotional pain.

The death of her husband, while naturally extremely painful, is something she hasn't been able to grieve-to-acceptance after nearly 30 years. From her descriptions of her own emotional state after his passing, she was clearly re-traumatized.

When a child is traumatized, subsequent events, which may or may not be perceived as inherently traumatic by the average person, are experienced as traumatic.

Nick\* was emotionally and physically abused, humiliated and isolated as a child. Both parents made him into the family "scapegoat." Everything that went wrong was his fault.

If a sibling failed a test, it was because he couldn't study because Nick had been making noise. When the father lost his job, he came home and beat Nick as a way of working out his own frustrations. When the other children had successes, Nick was compared to them, often publicly and unfavorably. He was humiliated at family get-togethers and called name: clumsy, stupid, wicked, no-good, rotten, idiot, loser, and so on.

As an adult, Nick has difficulty trusting others. His body experiences any conflict, no matter how minor, as life-threatening: he goes into full panic if anyone disagrees with him, corrects him, or separates from him. He married a woman who was verbally and occasionally physically abusive to him (they've since divorced). He's never had children, he's afraid he'd be a "no-good" father.

His mother was diagnosed as having narcissistic personality disorder and his father as anti-social. Their own marriage couldn't have survived without having Nick to blame for everything. Nick himself has many narcissistic tendencies, but because he is very aware of this, he is working hard on himself.

He used to get very angry and yell at, or cut-off, friends who couldn't meet his demands. He was a black-and-white thinker: people were either good or bad (his beliefs changed depending on whether the person met his needs or not); the world was a dangerous and hostile place and he felt the constant need to protect himself from its onslaught; his bosses all were "maniacs" and the people he managed were all "lazy."

The slightest changes caused him anxiety, he was in psychic pain most of the time. He recalls that once his dentist had to reschedule his appointment because of an emergency, and he wrote a four-page letter to him, chastising him for his inconsideration.

Nick recognizes that he was a very difficult person to be around. Once he was able to understand at both the intellectual and emotional levels how his traumatic childhood contributed to his symptoms, and once he let go of self-blame, he was able to blame others less. After several years of therapy he has become a more gracious friend, employee, and manager and has begun a new relationship. He still has to work on respecting other people's boundaries and his own, but he's proud of the progress he's made so far and plans to continue moving forward.

More on trauma, soon.

\*Not his real name.