

How Childhood Attachment Trauma Can Affect Adult Relationships

Understanding the implications of childhood trauma on later attachment.



My brother Daniel and I were physically abused by our father and stepmother

At five years old, I ran away from both of my parents and went to live with my grandparents. During this time, I experienced a loving and nurturing environment. My grandparents, however,

decided to go to the United States of America when I was 12 years old. I then had to go and live with my father and his new wife. For six months, I suffered a lot of abuse from both of them. When I could not take anymore, I reported them to the school authorities. The authorities took me away from my father and sent me to live in a secondary school.

Our most developmentally important relationships begin in our formative years and come from our teachers, mentors, friends, and our parents or parental figures. How we connect with others is, in some ways, tied to what we are taught in these early years.

Caregivers who themselves have a secure attachment will likely be modeling healthy behaviors from a place of trust, vulnerability, authenticity, and self-compassion, and, as children, we learn and imitate accordingly. On the flip side, parents or caregivers who have a more insecure attachment style may be more likely to model behaviors from a place of their own wounds, which can inadvertently influence how we develop our attachment style.

There is ample research suggesting correlations between how we are raised, the type of parenting practices used, and

the probability of developing disorders of stress or trauma-related personality disorders such as Borderline Personality disorder (BPD). For example, parenting practices and parenting attachment styles are a combination of factors including environmental contingencies, heredity, and the potential for the inter-generational transmission of child abuse.

If our caregivers battle their own unhealed trauma or attachment wounds, they may be parenting from a place of maltreatment. Research suggests that an estimated 93 percent of adolescents raised by a parent with BPD have experienced maltreatment and/or abuse, compared to a sample of adolescents raised by non-disordered caregivers, with as many as 47 percent admitting their maltreatment earlier in life was a predictor of abusing their own children.

Because there are many factors in play, including individual differences, being raised by a caregiver with toxic parenting practices is not a guarantee that we will inherit attachment trauma, that we will go on to develop other disorders, such as BPD, or that our relationships will be negatively affected.

What Is Attachment Trauma?

Simply put, trauma is defined as any event that happens to us that is severely emotionally distressing and falls outside of our natural resiliency and natural abilities to cope. When trauma is based on attachment, this suggests a rupture in the parent/child bonding process during the formative years that is not repaired but is perpetuated from one attachment wound to another.

Attachment trauma is correlated with parents or caregivers who are negligent, abusive, emotionally unavailable, or abandoning.

When there is a secure base between caregiver and child, a rupture in attachment is typically met with repair and correction. This can become a teaching moment for both the parent and the child.

Because no parent is perfect, these types of ruptures can happen. For example, a parent may get distracted with work and forget to tuck their child into bed one night. Or a parent may scold their child for disturbing them in the middle of a deadline they were working on. If the relationship is based on a secure attachment, these incidences can be corrective, to help strengthen the bond between parent and child.

With attachment trauma, one rupture after another happens without repair, often leaving the child to feel confused, angry, neglected, and abandoned. In time, and without support, the

child's sense of self-identity can be compromised, which often predisposes them to similar patterns of trauma in their adult intimate relationships.

Attachment Trauma and Our Adult Self

If we have experienced attachment trauma, it leaves an indelible mark. Because our attachment style is formed and typically stable by the age of three years old, how we learn to attach to others in our lives is also a relatively stable pattern. We may be unaware that our unmet emotional needs are unconsciously guiding our behavior, but they may be seen in the patterns of our adult relationships.

When there is an incomplete sense of self, we lack the foundation of who we are at our core. We may impulsively jump from one relationship to another, trying to “find” ourselves, or we may have a history of turbulent friendships, hobbies, or interests that are based on whims, or otherwise unhealthy connection. Without understanding who we are, we're at risk of repeating our attachment wounds in our adult relationships. While these wounds are typically replaying on an unconscious level, the more they replay without repair, the greater the risk of damage to our sense of self.

Traumatic Bonding ("Push-Pull Relationships")

An overarching theme of unresolved childhood attachment trauma often manifests in our adult relationships as traumatic bonding and a compulsion to unconsciously repeat our unresolved core wounds.

Bessel van der Kolk, a psychiatrist, researcher, and educator on trauma, explains, "Many traumatized people expose themselves, seemingly compulsively, to situations reminiscent of the original trauma." Thus, we often gravitate toward situations that feel comfortable and familiar, even if they perpetuate our trauma.

For example, we may have a history of “chasing” relationships, which is a behavior pattern often associated with attachment trauma and a fear of abandonment. In this pattern, we may find ourselves pulling towards relationships (“chasing”) to avoid being alone. These relationships may move very quickly, and may identify with cycles of idealization and devaluation. Similarly, we may feel a chronic sense of boredom or indifference, or a need to push away, or "run," from intimacy, as it may feel emotionally threatening. Or, we may vacillate between both pulling toward and pushing away in our relationships, with the overarching theme being simultaneously wanting and fearing connection.

In healing from attachment trauma, it's important to remember that our behavior patterns—even if maladaptive—served an important function early in our lives. If our adult behavior

patterns are no longer serving us in a healthy way, it's equally important to recognize where they were learned, why they were learned, and how to create healthier patterns in our relationships.

Issues from childhood which are left unresolved can severely affect how people interact with the world as adults. These issues can hinder growth and spiritual development making evolution in the human species almost impossible. By becoming more educated in the field of Psychology, it is my hope that I will be able to relieve some of the human suffering caused by personal traumas.

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