

Emotional Trauma

Physical trauma is obvious - it leaves a wound which usually heals over time, sometimes leaving a scar. You can point to it and say, "I've been injured. This happened to me, and it's real."

Emotional trauma is not so obvious. It's harder to locate - what inside yourself could you point to? It's harder to describe - how exactly have you been hurt? And it's harder to prove it is real - why isn't this something you can just shake off and then move on?

Emotional traumas are every bit as real as physical traumas. They leave us wounded and in need of treatment. In time, our emotional wounds can heal but they will usually leave scars. At the Bernstein Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy, we help people every day with their emotional wounds. Using our unique combination of counseling and bodywork techniques, we can help you recover a sense of wholeness and health in your life and in your relationships.

What is Emotional Trauma?

Trauma is damage. It is a wound, an injury, or a state of shock experienced as the result of a single event or prolonged series of events. Physical and emotional traumas are related but not always dependent on each other. Let's use the example of a scraped knee to illustrate this point.

An adult slips while walking down the street and scrapes his knee against the rough pavement. The scrape is not a serious one, the adult has scraped his knee before, and he knows to apply a bandage and give the wound time to heal. His trauma is minor and physical, of short duration. A small child falls down and scrapes her knee while learning to walk. This is the first time she has been hurt in this way and it scares her. Her trauma is both physical and emotional, and a loving caregiver can do much to help her heal. If the child is responded to harshly, however, and receives criticism for her clumsiness, her emotional trauma can remain long after her scraped knee has healed. She will become highly fearful of falling and being criticized again.

Key to understanding emotional trauma is differentiating between an event and an individual's experience of that event. Many events are neither inherently traumatic nor non-traumatic. Two adults who lose their jobs may respond very differently to their situations. For one, the unexpected loss of a secure income can create a panic state. For another, the sudden launching into a new phase of life may be just the impetus needed to make an exciting change. Emotional trauma often has common elements: the event was unexpected, the person experiencing the event felt unprepared, there was

nothing the person could do to prevent the experience from happening, and the event or the loss of control experienced seemed to threaten the person's safety and security.

Another key to understanding emotional trauma is appreciating the difference between emotional trauma and stress. Stress and emotional trauma have different outcomes and produce symptoms of shorter or longer duration and intensity. Examining how quickly the upset was triggered, how intense the upset was, how intensely threatening the source of the upset was, and how long it took to recover and become calm makes the distinction easier. If individuals can express their distress and have methods in place to release it, they are most likely dealing with stress. Individuals who become frozen in distress, who are unable to calm themselves or ask for and receive help, and who take a long time to recover normal functioning are most likely suffering with emotional trauma.

What causes emotional trauma?

Emotional trauma can be experienced at any age, from infancy through adulthood. It can be the result of a single event, or a prolonged series of events. Events which commonly cause emotional trauma include:

- Serious illness, injury, accident, or disability
- Death of a loved one
- Divorce or loss of a significant relationship
- Child abuse or neglect, incest, rape, domestic abuse or violence
- Criminal violence or assault
- Military combat, law enforcement, fire-fighting and rescue experiences
- Witnessing horrific events
- Natural disasters, terrorist attacks

At the time of a traumatic incident, our nervous system responds unconsciously to protect us. When threatening events for which we are unprepared overwhelm us, we often mentally and sometimes physically "freeze". This freeze response is clearly illustrated when a cat catches and plays with a mouse. The mouse freezes and "plays dead". Eventually the cat may lose interest and leave. Once the danger is over, the mouse "thaws out" and can escape. Once it reaches safety, it will tremble for awhile until it recovers. The recovery process is automatic for the mouse but not for humans. People can override their need to thaw out and recover as long as they believe the threat continues. They may carry around trauma-related thoughts, emotions and sensations for years, either consciously or unconsciously. Events similar to the initial trauma can trigger ever stronger freeze responses and states unless the first trauma is released and expressed.

Why are some people more affected by traumatic events?

Some events are almost always traumatic. Child abuse, severe injury, military combat, and violent crime are examples of events that mark almost everyone they touch. However, as with the example of the loss of a job, some events may or may not produce emotional trauma. It can be hard to predict how an individual will respond to an unexpected, unprepared-for event. Some of the factors involved are:

- The severity of the event relative to the age or stage of development of the individual
- The individual's nature and early history, including inborn temperament, attachment experiences with caregivers, and security and stability of home life during childhood
- Previous experiences similar to the current event, and how well the individual resolved and recovered from them
- The individual's coping skills, and values and beliefs around loss of control or weakness and vulnerability
- The responses of the individual's family, friends, and loved ones
- The availability of professional support and assistance, if needed

Children, especially, are deeply affected by physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Memories of the trauma may stay hidden or suppressed in their minds and bodies for years until they are triggered by a physical touch or a state-specific event similar to their original experience. Attachment disorders can limit a child's emotional development and maturity, limiting their ability as adults to cope with difficult events. Children who have been frequently criticized internalize these messages and as adults may berate themselves for being unable to manage their lives and emotions.

Overwhelming events can traumatize adults with even the best of childhoods and the most loving and supporting of parents. To heal from emotional trauma we must be willing to experience our pain and loss, to accept that we cannot always be in control, and also to accept that there is unfairness, injustice, and even evil in the world. The discovery of hope and purpose in our lives, even through our painful experiences, makes a great difference on the road to healing.

What are the symptoms of emotional trauma?

Individuals respond to traumatic events in a wide variety of ways. Sometimes symptoms will appear soon after the event, and sometimes they remain buried for years until they are triggered by present-day occurrences. It is not always easy to connect the symptoms to the original trauma, especially if they were deeply buried.

Symptoms of emotional trauma include:

- Eating disorders, drug or alcohol abuse
- Sleep disturbances, nightmares, insomnia
- Sexual dysfunction or promiscuity
- Low energy, chronic fatigue syndrome
- Chronic, unexplained pain
- Compulsive or obsessive behaviors
- Indigestion, ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome
- Headaches, migraines
- ADHD symptoms
- Depression, mood swings, intense or frequent crying episodes, hopelessness
- Disassociative and regressive tendencies

- Anxiety, panic attacks, fearfulness, tension, hypersensitivity, always being on guard
- Compulsive or obsessive thoughts, flashbacks
- Intense anger, rage, irritability, aggressiveness, overreactions, picking fights
- Sadness, bitterness, resentment, guilt feelings
- Emotional numbness, withdrawal, intense grief reactions
- Memory lapses, difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Amnesia of time periods or events
- Preoccupation with thoughts of death or suicide
- Inability to maintain healthy relationships, isolationist tendencies
- Low self-esteem, lack of confidence
- Self-defeating or self-destructive thoughts and behaviors
- Avoidance of specific people, places, or activities
- Co-dependent or enabling relationships
- Passive/aggressive tendencies, extreme adaptability

In sexual abuse cases, we see patterns that all victims seem to share:

- Disrupted and distressed relationships
- Disassociation from the present during stress or regressions
- Fear of surprise
- Fear of change
- Fear of and difficulty coping with lack of routine or unfamiliar surroundings
- Discomfort during good times, when life is going better
- Intense need for emotional and physical security, including financial security
- Lack of trust

Symptoms of emotional trauma should be taken as seriously as those of physical trauma. Individuals must take the necessary steps to heal, and often require assistance. There is no way to predict how long recovery will take.

What are some of the long-term effects of unresolved emotional trauma?

Unexpressed and unresolved emotional trauma results in lasting difficulties and recurring problems in current-day life. Without treatment, the symptoms an individual experiences will worsen with time. Their quality of life is affected, their physical health can deteriorate, and their relationships may dissolve. Life can become a dissatisfying, monotonous, almost hopeless routine. The world may become a more frightening place with each passing year.

Then something may happen, an event may occur to break the pattern. An individual's carefully achieved but fragile defenses may be disrupted by an event that penetrates their armor. In this frightening moment lies the opportunity for hope and change.

How is emotional trauma treated and resolved?

Emotional trauma can be treated with the help of a skilled and compassionate psychotherapist. Traditional approaches to treating emotional trauma have included talk therapies, cognitive-behavioral therapy, relaxation and stress reduction techniques, or hypnosis, used separately or in combination.

At the Bernstein Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy, we treat emotional trauma with a new and innovative method. We combine talk therapy with a bodywork modality we created which incorporates Reichian psychotherapy and myofascial release physical therapy. Our approach is extremely effective in accessing and releasing the pain and memories of emotional or physical trauma that are held in the mind and the body. To our knowledge, no other physical or emotional therapy has been able to resolve the pain and obtain the relief and dramatic results we have observed in our patients. Our work brings hope and healing to those who have suffered for years under the burden of emotional pain. We know we can help you.