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Everyone Experiences Trauma

By Julie McAllister, Infinite Healing & Wellness

It is widely understood that post-traumatic stress (PTS) frequently results from threats to life or bodily safety such as accidents, war, violent assaults, or natural disasters, but many people underestimate the effects of their own developmental attachment trauma. Any situation that leaves a person feeling helpless, overwhelmed, or isolated can be traumatic, even when no physical harm was involved. This is particularly harmful when it happens during childhood.

Children are exposed to developmental trauma when they are subjected to anything that disrupts their sense of safety, including abuse, neglect, environmental instability, or separation from their parents or other primary caregivers. These early traumas typically result in attachment fractures that take place gradually and have a cumulative effect.

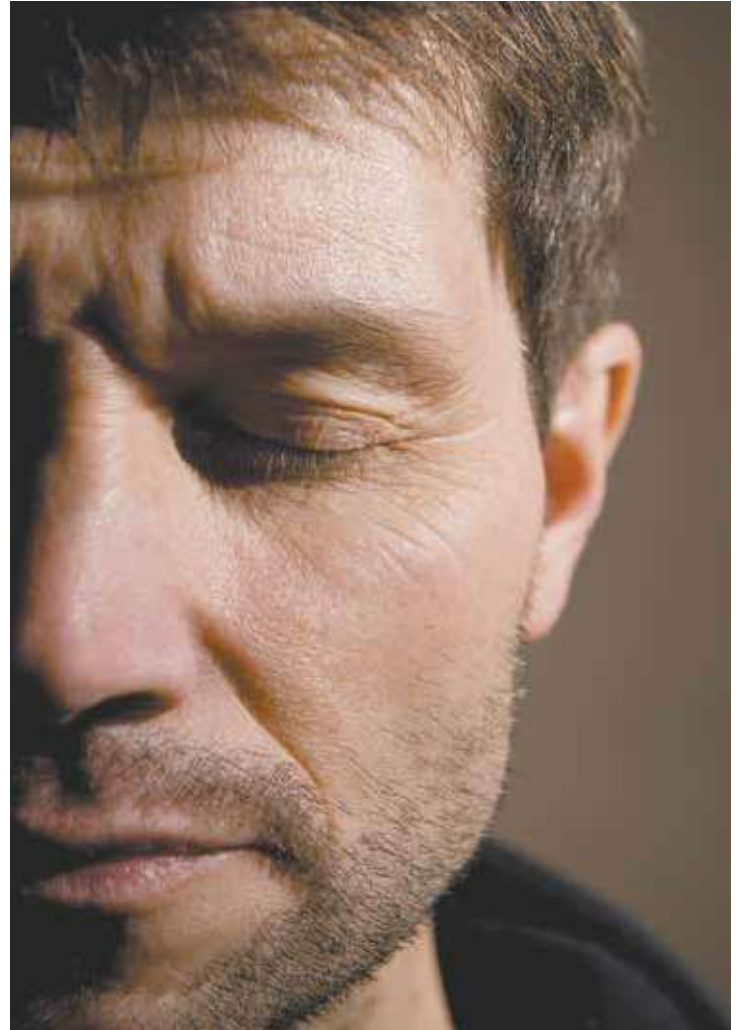
Early relationship connections have a significant effect on our adult relationships. To understand this concept, we first need to understand attachment theory, widely studied in the field of developmental psychology. Developed in the 1960s and 70s by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, it essentially states that infants have an innate drive to survive and have total and complete dependency on their caregivers to meet their basic needs. As babies strive to get their needs met, they develop an attachment to primary caregivers that tends to remain constant as a model for expectation of what love is like in adult relationships as well as dictating their future parenting style. This attachment style critically affects emotional development and the quality of intimate relationships.

The development of a secure sense of attachment in childhood fosters a stronger ability to regulate emotions and increased confidence in exploration of the child's surroundings. Secure attachment in early childhood indicates a safe and secure adult attachment style, creating a strong foundation for healthy relationships. What happens when caregivers are unavailable or are unresponsive to a child's needs? Insecure attachment patterns develop. There are three styles of insecure attachment:

Anxious attachment — When a parental figure is inconsistent or unable to effectively respond to their child's needs the child becomes confused, insecure and unsure of how they will be treated. The child may feel suspicious or distrustful of their caregiver, while also feeling desperate for their attention. A child with an insecure anxious attachment to their parent often has ambivalent or preoccupied attachments in intimate relationships in adulthood.

Avoidant attachment — This type of attachment pattern develops when a primary caregiver is emotionally unavailable or unresponsive to the child's needs. The parent may be neglectful and rejecting at times, often discouraging crying. Premature independence may be encouraged and children learn to disconnect from their needs to minimize the significance of emotions. Children with avoidant attachment patterns grow into adults who have a dismissive or withdrawn attachment style.

Disorganized attachment — When a caregiver abuses or neglects a child, or when the home is unstable and chaotic, a child may develop a disorganized attachment with their parents.



An infant or child depends on their parent for protection, but may simultaneously feel fearful of them, leading to the development of dissociation as a protective coping strategy. These children often feel disconnected, may suffer from memory lapses, and abusive experiences may be blocked from their consciousness.

Adults who have insecure attachment patterns may struggle with depression, anxiety, a deep sense of loneliness and despair, negative self-worth, lack of safety, emotional dysregulation, rigidly held dysfunctional beliefs about themselves and others, pervasive relationship problems, addictions, compulsivity, and unmet longings to be loved and comforted.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) commonly occurs because of a major trauma, but often we find that the trauma from attachment fractures can cause more chronic post-traumatic stress symptoms than those occurring from major trauma. Per Francine Shapiro, the founder and developer of EMDR therapy, "Post-traumatic stress is a failure of the information processing system in the brain, which causes a memory to be stored with

the original emotions and sensations that occurred at the time of the event.” Rather than being processed correctly, the event is maladaptively stored, and when triggered, the event is recalled as vividly as if the event is being relived again.

The National Institute of Mental Health states the following as symptoms of PTSD:

- Flashbacks — reliving the trauma over and over, including physical symptoms like a racing heart or sweating
- Nightmares
- Staying away from places, events, or objects that are reminders of the traumatic experience
- Avoiding thoughts or feelings related to the traumatic event
- Being easily startled
- Feeling tense or “on edge”
- Having difficulty sleeping
- Having angry outbursts
- Trouble remembering key features of the traumatic event
- Negative thoughts about oneself or the world
- Distorted feelings like guilt or blame
- Loss of interest in enjoyable activities

The World Health Organization (WHO), American Psychiatric Association (APA), and the Department of Veterans Affairs recommend Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR Therapy) a leading treatment option for individuals diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Per familyattachment.com, EMDR is a “power tool in the treatment of attachment disorders.”

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a widely researched, evidenced-based therapeutic technique that can help. EMDR Therapy is a physiologically based therapy designed to allow the processing of maladaptively stored memories and associations. Once the information is processed it is possible to think about previously disturbing memories in a new way easing feelings of distress and discomfort. EMDR Therapy opens the door for the development of new insight and awareness which allows negative beliefs and painful emotions to be replaced with positive thoughts and feelings. By creating new adaptive neural pathways in the brain, EMDR Therapy provides freedom from emotional distress and promotes the ability to regain a positive sense of self and improved relationships.

Julie McAllister is a Licensed Professional Counselor and a Certified EMDR Clinician at Infinite Healing and Wellness with specialized training in attachment and trauma. To learn more, contact Julie at 480-448-1076 or JulieM@infinitehw.com.

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