



Signs of Unresolved Trauma

Emotional trauma is a serious issue that affects millions of adults worldwide. Trauma can result from experiencing a disturbing or distressing event that leaves a lasting impact on a person's emotional, mental, and physical well-being. In many instances, people who have suffered emotional trauma may not even realize it until they begin to experience symptoms that can negatively impact their daily lives. In this article, we will explore the signs of emotional trauma in adults and offer some strategies for recognizing and addressing its symptoms.

Remember, if you are suffering from unresolved trauma, healing is possible. In fact, it happens with clients all the time. If you are willing to do the hard work and seek professional help, you can learn to move through the past experiences that hold you back and heal.

Understanding Emotional Trauma

Before we dive into the signs of emotional trauma in adults, it's important to understand what emotional trauma is and what causes it. Emotional trauma can result from various experiences, ranging from childhood abuse to adult experiences, such as sexual assault, a severe medical crisis, domestic violence, combat, working as a first responder, or being in a car accident. These are sometimes referred to as "Big T" traumas. But ongoing stressors or repetitive negative events can also cause trauma. These can be referred to as "Little t" traumas. "Little t" traumas are often referred to as cumulative trauma.

For example, when you grow up in a family where your parents or caregivers are emotionally absent, you may suffer from childhood emotional neglect. Each instance of neglect is a small trauma. Mild or moderately emotionally abusive people in your life can expose you to cumulative trauma over time when they expose you regular or constant demeaning remarks that attack your self-worth.

Whether trauma hits in a big bang or a thousand cuts, it can cause lasting impact on a person's life, especially when left unprocessed.

There are things we've gone through that we might think are 'normal' or just things we must deal with in life. Trauma from medical providers or dentists, church hurt, being rejected by

friends or partners, and so on. We might think we should 'just get over it' when we feel panic at the idea of getting a shot, having our blood taken, or getting our teeth cleaned.

We turn away from the idea of going to church, temple or synagogue because of being shamed throughout our lives just for being an imperfect person or because someone who we should have been able to trust used scripture or other religious texts or beliefs as a weapon to hurt or control us. We might think it's normal to believe that you can't trust anyone because people suck and everyone is going to hurt you because of the betrayals we've experienced in life.

What if those beliefs were untrue? What if you didn't just have to 'deal with it' for the rest of your life and instead could actually be free of that weight and pain? EMDR can help.

Life-Impacts of Unprocessed or "Stuck" Trauma

Unprocessed emotional trauma can negatively impact a person's:

- Emotional resilience
- Ability to trust
- Self-esteem
- Amount of guilt or shame
- Need for control
- Ability to tolerate discomfort
- Comfort level with vulnerability
- Fight, flight, or freeze response
- Attachment style
- Close relationships
- Choice of romantic partner
- Fear of change
- Physical health
- ...and much more

Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms of Emotional Trauma

Recognizing the signs of emotional trauma in adults is key to addressing its symptoms before they worsen. Here are some of the most common physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive symptoms that people may experience when they have emotional trauma.

Physical Symptoms of Trauma

People who have suffered emotional trauma may experience a variety of physical symptoms that may be caused by the body's response to prolonged stress and anxiety. When a person is experiencing emotional trauma, their body is constantly in a state of heightened arousal or activation, which can lead to physical symptoms.

Physical symptoms of trauma may include (but are not limited to):

1. Fatigue or chronic tiredness
2. Insomnia or disturbances in sleep patterns
3. Headaches or migraines
4. Muscle tension, stiffness, or chronic pain
5. Gastrointestinal problems, such as stomachaches, nausea, or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
6. Changes in appetite, including overeating or loss of appetite
7. Chronic autoimmune disorders
8. Increased heart rate, heart palpitations, or chest discomfort
9. Shortness of breath, hyperventilation, or difficulty breathing
10. Dizziness, lightheadedness, or feeling faint
11. Skin problems, such as rashes, hives, or eczema

*It is important to note that many other medical issues may cause these same symptoms. If you are experiencing symptoms, please consult with a doctor before drawing conclusions.

Emotional Symptoms of Trauma

Emotional symptoms of trauma can be particularly challenging to deal with, as they can impact a person's relationships, work, and overall quality of life.

Emotional symptoms of trauma may include (but are not limited to):

1. Intrusive thoughts or flashbacks related to the traumatic event
2. Intense feelings of fear, anxiety, or panic
3. Avoidance of reminders or triggers associated with the trauma
4. Hypervigilance or being constantly on guard for potential threats
5. Feelings of numbness, detachment, or emotional shutdown
6. Difficulty concentrating or experiencing memory problems
7. Persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, or depression
8. Irritability, anger outbursts, or emotional instability
9. Self-blame, guilt, or shame related to the traumatic experience
10. Social withdrawal or isolation, avoiding relationships or activities previously enjoyed

People who have experienced emotional trauma may also struggle with feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame. Remember to be kind to yourself, and reach out to a therapist if you suspect you may have underlying trauma.

Behavioral Symptoms of Trauma

In many cases of unresolved emotional trauma, behavioral symptoms or patterns may develop as a person struggles to cope or compensate for lingering pain.

Behavioral symptoms of trauma may include (but are not limited to):

1. Avoidance of situations, places, or people that remind the individual of the traumatic event
2. Social withdrawal or isolation, avoiding social interactions or relationships
3. Changes in sleep patterns, such as insomnia or excessive sleeping
4. Changes in appetite or eating patterns, such as overeating or loss of appetite
5. Increased use of substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs) as a way to cope with distressing emotions
6. Self-harming behaviors, such as cutting or burning oneself
7. Aggressive or impulsive behaviors, including outbursts of anger or physical confrontations
8. Difficulty in trusting others or forming new relationships
9. Risky or reckless behaviors, seeking thrills or engaging in dangerous activities
10. Difficulties in daily functioning, such as problems at work or school, or neglecting personal responsibilities

Trauma Hijacking

One of the most impactful ways of recognizing that you suffer from unresolved trauma that affects you today is when you recognize that you have been suffering from trauma hijacking. Dr. Andrew Dobo is an expert in EMDR and trauma. He has written several books about it, including *Unburdening Souls at the Speed of Thought* and *The Hero's Journey, Integrating Jungian Psychology and EMDR Therapy*. Dr. Dobo refers to unresolved trauma as "The past is present."

You'll understand what that means if you've ever experienced it before. For example, 'the past is present' when you've been in a relationship and things are going along just fine, then your partner says something with a certain tone or inflection, or acts in a certain way that is similar to something that a person in your past did to you, and suddenly all of those feelings and reactions from the past immediately come flooding in and you're in fight, flight or freeze mode.

You may become enraged and start yelling or breaking things, you may shut down completely, or you may run away or withdraw. For military veterans or first responders who've been exposed to significant trauma, or victims of domestic violence or other violent acts, a 'past is present' trigger may be the sound of a door slamming, the smell of smoke, a piece of trash on the road, someone yelling in anger, or other tactile, auditory, olfactory or visual sensations. A trauma hijack may cause you to act out physically, such as a combat veteran dropping prone when they hear a loud bang, or a victim of abuse cowering physically or tensing up and clenching their fists, ready to fight when someone speaks to them in an angry tone. We get hijacked when the past is present because trauma is "stuck" in our 'lizard brain'.

How does that happen? You may already know this, but for those of you who don't, let me explain. Our brain has several parts. Our pre-frontal cortex (the part behind your forehead) is our judgment center. That doesn't finish developing until you're about 25 years old, which is why young people can make such incredibly foolish decisions. The upper part of our brain, or the cerebral cortex, is the thinking center of our brain, where both creative and logical thinking (and everything else) happens. It's our "CPU." Our lizard brain, which consists of our brain stem, limbic system and amygdala, is where the problem of trauma hijacking comes from.

Traumatic experiences are interpreted by our brains as something that threatens our existence – these experiences are either a real threat to our life or something that feels like it. Our lizard brain exists to protect us. When trauma is unprocessed, it remains 'stuck', and when something happens that seems like the original trauma, our original reactions come out again, just like when it first happened. If you were badly bullied in elementary school and someone at work or at home picks on you sarcastically, all of those feelings of shame, inadequacy, embarrassment and rage can come roaring to the surface, just like when you were that little kid.

What this means is that you can't just make yourself stop reacting the way you do. The frustration, anger and shame you may feel about your reactions is misplaced if your actions are driven by the engine of unresolved trauma. The **very** good news about this is that once you engage in trauma resolution therapy such as EMDR and resolve that leftover trauma, it can no longer hijack you. Upsetting things will still be upsetting, but you are no longer out of control. You can manage your upsetting feelings, think clearly, and make better decisions. This means that you can become free of your past!

EMDR

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, or EMDR, is a form of trauma therapy that has helped millions of people since being created in the early 1990's by Dr. Francine Shapiro. Please check out www.EMDRIA.org to learn more about it and how it works.

I'm a Certified EMDR therapist and Certified Transformational EMDR therapist. I've used EMDR myself and I've had the honor of helping hundreds of clients overcome their trauma using it. EMDR is an incredibly powerful tool that can help you to accept yourself without judgment. I grew up with feelings of inadequacy due to abuse, having ADHD, my mom's alcoholism and my father's abandonment. Because of my ADHD, I thought I had to be perfect. Because of my abuse, I thought I wasn't good enough. Because of my mom's alcoholism and my dad leaving, I thought I didn't matter. It took me years to heal.

Despite all of my hard work in therapy, journaling, and positive self-statements, I still got stuck in negativity. Anytime I messed up, I had a habit of getting mad at myself. When I hurt my wife's or daughters' feelings, I felt like a terrible person.

Whenever that happened, and I was hijacked (trauma hijack) by my feelings of shame and inadequacy, I couldn't just make myself stop reacting the way I did. The frustration, anger, and shame I felt about my reactions were misplaced because my reactions were driven by the engine of unresolved trauma. It took learning about trauma for me to be able to give myself grace and recognize that when I was triggered, I needed to take a time out. After doing my own EMDR work, much of that past trauma has been resolved, and I react much better. I'm not perfect, but I'm much less likely to get hijacked and just react badly. I can think it through.

When we go through our day, we absorb information and experiences. When we sleep, our brains sort through that information. Some of it is stored, and some discarded. REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep, where we dream, is one of the ways that this information is processed. When trauma happens, it activates our body's sympathetic nervous system, causing a fight-flight-freeze reaction.

Trauma, either physical or emotional, triggers our body's response to deadly danger. When that happens, it's very powerful, and our brains can have a hard time properly sorting out that information. Oftentimes, it gets 'stuck' and cannot be resolved. Nightmares, flashbacks, and very strong reactions to everyday situations (trauma hijacks) occur without warning, and we are overwhelmed. Traumatic events, big or small, can cause us to have false, negative beliefs about ourselves and others, such as feeling worthless, unsafe, or that you don't matter.

When you process these memories with EMDR, the traumatic experience gets processed in a healthy fashion. The strong emotional and physiological responses dissipate, and the information (memory) of the events can be properly stored. Over time, the negative belief is 'cleaned out' and the truth can be felt at a heart, or gut level - that you ARE good enough, that you DO matter, and that you ARE safe.

Once you engage in EMDR trauma resolution therapy and resolve that leftover trauma, it can no longer hijack you. Upsetting things will still be upsetting, but you are no longer out of control. You can manage your upsetting feelings, think clearly, and make better decisions. This means that you can become free of your past!

I encourage you to educate yourself about EMDR and find a therapist to work through your past trauma. A detailed description of EMDR and the brain science behind it are covered in other books like Dr. Francine Shapiro's *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy: Basic Principles, Protocols and Procedures*. There are videos about EMDR as well as tons of research articles that validate EMDR as an evidence-based treatment protocol.