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TRAUMA, CAUSES OF

Trauma can be caused by several factors and experiences, some more obvious than others. To fully understand and help an individual who is experiencing trauma, one must go beyond the experience and fully investigate and understand the cause(s) of an individual's trauma. Understanding the cause or causes might provide vital clues in developing ways and tools for working with the trauma itself, enabling a person to manage his or her symptoms of trauma, as well as bringing to the person's awareness the original causes that may result in retraumatization.

This entry introduces the causes of trauma, focusing on the following areas: conceptualization of the causes of trauma, emotional and psychological trauma, spiritual trauma, and cultural trauma. Also provided is an overview of other causes of trauma that may be generally overlooked.

Conceptualization

All causes of trauma have three aspects in common:

An external cause: It is generally believed that trauma is not inflicted on oneself by oneself. It has to be inflicted by another person or by something else. The suddenness and the unpredictability of the situation or experience are key components in experiencing something as traumatic.

Violation: This refers to the sense of experiencing something or someone as an intrusion in the individual's life. In other words, the individual may experience his or her physical, emotional, and psychological self as being invaded by an unwelcomed and unexpected person or thing that presents itself as a major source of distress.

Loss of control: Because the traumatic experience is unexpected and sudden, individuals, more often than not, are unprepared for the situation. This can then result in a sense of feeling overwhelmed and helpless, leaving the individual feeling extremely vulnerable and exposed to the cause of trauma.

The causes of trauma may differ from one individual to another—that is, what is perceived as a traumatic experience for one person may not necessarily be the same for someone else. However, it could be stated that some causes of trauma may be generalized to a larger population. These causes may be considered universal because of their tendency to affect individuals from various cultural, social, political, religious, spiritual, economic, and psychological backgrounds. The following section discusses what are believed to be universal causes or sources of trauma.

Emotional and Psychological Trauma

This type of trauma directly affects the individual's psychological and emotional makeup and functioning. In other words, emotional and psychological trauma may interfere with the way an individual processes emotions, perceives situations, expresses feelings, and responds to circumstances (known and unknown), as well as the manner in which the person will deal with the trauma.

The causes of this kind of trauma include but are not limited to sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse, financial abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, intense exposure to poverty, domestic violence, loss of a loved one (sudden or gradual), exposure to war, acts of violence, insomnia, exposure to alcoholism and substance abuse, intense torture (as in wars), being a victim of theft or robbery, and being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness or life condition. Another cause of emotional and/or psychological trauma is the diagnosis of a mental or psychiatric illness, which can deeply impair an individual's emotional and psychological well-being.

All of these causes can affect an individual in ways that interrupt or interfere with his or her daily functioning.

Spiritual Trauma

This kind of trauma, increasingly gaining recognition as an important area in traumatology, is related

to the spiritual beliefs and frameworks of an individual and how these are affected, challenged, modified, or betrayed by another person or thing. The causes of spiritual trauma include but are not limited to the following: spiritual emergency (refers to a type of spiritual crisis that leads to sudden spiritual and mystical experiences that a person may not be able to deal with in the moment), religious dogmatization, deep loss of faith, and forced conversion of religious faith. Sexual and/or emotional abuse by religious officials (such as clergy, religious preachers and teachers, religious gurus, or masters) is also another possible cause of spiritual trauma, resulting in a sense of betrayal in one's faith.

Cultural Trauma

This category of trauma relates to situations or experiences that individuals experience together, either as a collective or social group. This group may play the role of perpetrators, victims, or spectators. Whatever the role, the group is affected by the experience in some form or another, and the residual effect of the experience may be passed on to several generations, thus resulting in future generations experiencing an innate sense of trauma even though it was not directly inflicted on them. An example of cultural trauma is that experienced by current generations or peoples of Germany whose Nazi ancestors perpetrated heinous and deplorable acts of violence against the Jews.

Some of the causes of cultural trauma include but are not limited to racism and apartheid, colonialism, and political and economic discrimination. The oppression of minorities, either in a domestic or foreign country, could also be a significant cause of cultural trauma. For instance, the oppression of certain races or tribes, the oppression of religious faiths or denominations, and the oppression of or discrimination against a particular sex are some examples of the causes of cultural trauma.

Neglected Causes of Trauma

Although emotional, psychological, spiritual, and cultural causes of trauma are universally considered and understood, some causes of trauma tend to be overlooked or neglected. It is not clear why this is the case, although these causes are now coming to light and are being given more attention. More research and exploratory studies are being conducted

in the following areas that are believed to be possible causes of trauma: physical falls or injuries, sport injuries, surgery (minor or major), automobile accidents, sudden or planned termination of a relationship, humiliating or deeply disappointing experiences, social isolation (involuntary), natural disasters, exposure to extreme climatic conditions, childbirth stress (for mother and/or child) and chronic pain, to name a few.

It is hoped that, with further studies and exploration, more light will be shed on how these causes of trauma affect an individual's life.

Childhood Trauma

Another area that has recently been focused on, although hitherto neglected, is that of childhood trauma. Recent studies and research have established that trauma experienced in childhood can have severe and long-lasting effects into adulthood, especially when not resolved.

Some of the causes of childhood trauma include the following: an unstable or unsafe environment; separation from a parent; debilitating illness; intrusive medical and dental procedures; sexual, physical, emotional, and verbal abuse; emotional and physical neglect; domestic violence; bullying; and the pressure to excel (e.g., in academics, sports, or extracurricular activities).

Conclusion

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that what one person perceives to be traumatic or life threatening (either consciously or unconsciously) may not necessarily be the same for another. As Peter Levine has noted, an individual's perception of trauma is based on the person's age, life experience, and constitutional temperament. Therefore, when assessing or investigating the causes of trauma, one should not assume that a certain cause or factor will necessarily be experienced as traumatic in an individual's life. This is especially the case when working with individuals from different cultural, religious, socioeconomic, spiritual, and racial backgrounds.

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See also Battered Women; Clergy, Sexual Abuse by; Culture and Trauma; Military Psychology and Combat Stress Injuries; Racial and Ethnic Factors

Further Readings

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TRAUMA, DEFINITIONS OF

Trauma has entered popular parlance in the last two decades, diminishing its centrality and salience in human lives (see the editor's Introduction to this encyclopedia). However, trauma is a dominant concept, the cloud over our happiness, the area of struggle for survival, the area between catastrophe and death.

Definition of Terms Related to Trauma

Before addressing trauma itself, let us define some terms used in conjunction with trauma. They are often confused with trauma itself.

Stress is an unpleasant state of strain, tension, or being taxed. In stress, physical, psychological, and social life-enhancing processes are challenged but not permanently dislodged. The source of stress is called a *stressor*, and the person is said to be *stressed*. The context of stress is a *stressful situation* or a *crisis*. However, biological, psychological, and social *stress responses* can still restore prior life-enhancing equilibria.

Stress can lead to further aggravation or resolution. In the latter situation, stress can even be beneficial through achievement of more favorable processes and learning how to *cope* with future stressful situations. This is called *resilience*.

In trauma, the situation is different. Imagine a stressed bone, which, even if bent, can spring back

to its original shape and function. But a fractured bone is a traumatized one, and no matter how well set and healed, a scar and a vulnerability will remain permanently.

The context in which trauma occurs is a *traumatic situation*. The source or cause of trauma is a *traumatic stressor*. The internal state of disrupted processes is a *traumatic state*, and the person in that state is said to be *traumatized*, or to be in a *state of trauma*. The often-used term *traumatic stress* is confusing because it sometimes denotes a traumatic stressor, at other times a state of trauma, and sometimes even the consequences of trauma.

The confusion is increased further because traumatic stress is determined post hoc by the occurrence or not of *posttraumatic stress disorder* (PTSD). If PTSD does not occur, the event in retrospect was not a traumatic stress, even though the same event, if at another time it did produce PTSD, was a traumatic stress. The term *posttraumatic stress*, used for symptoms that correspond with PTSD symptoms but are not part of PTSD, confuses the picture even more.

The reason for the confusion is the lack of differentiation between stress and trauma. Yet as we saw, they are two different concepts. This is evidenced by the fact that each has its own body of literature; there are, for instance, separate encyclopedias devoted to the two concepts.

History of Definition of Trauma

A major problem in the definition of *trauma* is that it, and the experience of it, produces wordlessness and thoughtlessness. The history of trauma has been its repeated disappearance, for instance, from official psychiatric diagnoses. It requires major catastrophes, such as wars, to force trauma into awareness.

Even then, trauma has often been described only through one or more observable consequences resulting from trauma. In the U.S. Civil War, *nostalgia* was emphasized; in World War I, *shell shock* and *cardiac neurosis*; in World War II, *combat fatigue* and digestive symptoms. More generic descriptions were *psychic shock* and being *overwhelmed*.

Understanding trauma took giant strides with the work of Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud at the end of the 19th century. Each described a splitting of the mind. Janet called the process *dissociation*, and Freud called it *splitting of consciousness*. In each case, emotional, cognitive, and contextual fragments