

Trauma

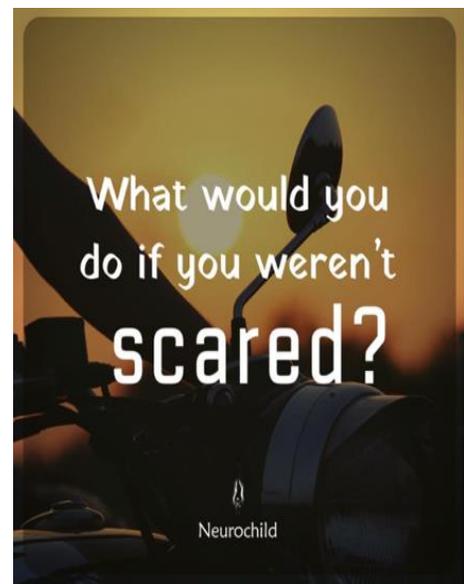
Students with trauma issues often behave in ways which look like ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). Trauma is often misdiagnosed as ADHD. As a result, some students are misdiagnosed with ADHD and prescribed various medications. Medication may address symptoms such as hyperactivity and concentration difficulties, but do not address the trauma issues.

Traumatic events occur at all ages. Trauma can be out-of-home care, poverty or neglect; physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse, accidents, natural disasters, family breakup, time in conflict zones, and so on. Not everyone with trauma issues has experienced dangerous events. People may become traumatized after a friend or family member experiences danger or harm, or after watching a catastrophic event on TV. Witnessing arguments where their safety or safety of a family member is compromised and the sudden, unexpected loss of a loved one can cause trauma. Trauma can cause a cascade of complex which impact brain development, behaviour and mood control (Atkinson, 2013; Cook et al., 2005; Perry, 2006, 2009; Van der Kolk et al., 2009).

For children and adolescents, trauma can have significant implications for the development of their cognition, language and self-identity. They often may be functioning from a constant unconscious state of fear.

Trauma causes the brain to become 'stuck' in survival mode. Traumatized people may subconsciously detect threats, often where there are none. In survival mode blunting of cognition, reasoning and learning may occur. Or, the person may be highly reactive. Neuroscientists speculate that this is due to a reduced thickness in the area of the brain that processes social information emotionally.

Some signs of **TRAUMA** are hyper vigilance, disassociation or 'zoning out', externalizing behaviours or 'acting out', impulsivity or difficulty controlling behaviour, and severe mood fluctuations. These symptoms often look like ADHD, or bad behaviour.



Here are some examples of how trauma can look in a classroom.

- **TRAUMA's** hypervigilance may be misread as distractibility.
Hypervigilance is when the nervous system becomes 'stuck' in an over-activated state, resulting in a student's inability to calm him/herself. The student may be constantly tapping, jiggling, and moving. The brain becomes locked into the 'fight or flight' mode.
- **TRAUMA's** disassociation may be misread as deliberate inattention or lack of focus.
Disassociation, is when people respond in a hypo-arousal, muted or under-reactive response. The brain regions that dampen down feelings like fear became more active thus reducing feelings of fear. This might sound good, but when individuals respond in a dissociative fashion, their emotions are 'turned down' too much, leading to feelings of emotional numbness or emotional deadness.
- **TRAUMA's** physical response of lashing out may be misread as violence or aggression, due to the increased activity in the amygdala, a region of the brain associated with feelings of fear. Feelings of fright, flight or freeze are activated, often result.
- **TRAUMA's** externalizing distress can be misread as 'acting out'. Trauma can disrupt the balance of certain neurotransmitters (chemicals in the brain) and hormones. Acting out usually takes the form of physical and/or verbal aggression, 'relational' aggression, (more common in girls), non-violent anti-social behaviour, or hyperactivity.
- **TRAUMA's** difficulty in controlling behaviour or mood fluctuations may be misread as willful disruptiveness. This can be due to lower parts of the brain being highly reactive.

So, what can schools do about this?

Educators are not trauma therapists; however, they can support students who have been traumatized by providing safe, nurturing environments, developing positive, healthy relationships with students, and ensuring the academic issues are directly addressed. These are things that most educators already do. Finally, remember to take care of yourself. Educators need to be calm and healthy so that they can provide an educationally nurturing environment for all.

References

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