

CAN ADDICTION CAUSE PTSD

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TRAUMA AND

ADDICTION

ADDICTION AND TRAUMA

- “Not all addictions are rooted in abuse or trauma, but I do believe they can all be traced to painful experience. A hurt is at the centre of all addictive behaviours. It is present in the gambler, the Internet addict, the compulsive shopper and the workaholic. The wound may not be as deep and the ache not as excruciating, and it may even be entirely hidden—but it’s there. As we’ll see, the effects of early stress or adverse experiences directly shape both the psychology and the neurobiology of addiction in the brain.”
— [Gabor Maté, In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction](#)

ADDICTION AND TRAUMA

We are becoming increasingly aware ,
through current research, that trauma
underpins most harmful addictions.

ADDICTION AND TRAUMA

- Many addicts self-medicate to soothe their emotional pain—but more than that, their brain development is sabotaged by their traumatic experiences in childhood or early adolescence . The systems subverted by addiction—the dopamine and opioid circuits, the limbic or emotional brain, the stress apparatus and the impulse control areas of the cortex—are not able develop normally in such circumstances

ADDICTION AND TRAUMA

- The addicted person is often using a substance to numb a conscious or unconscious hurt
- In the 25 years that I have worked with addiction very rarely has there been a time when a client has engaged in therapy that we have not uncovered some kind of trauma that has been driving the addiction

WHAT IS TRAUMA

- A traumatic event is any event where someone's life or safety is at serious risk.
- They can be one of events, like car accidents, rape, mugging or natural disasters
- Or they can be drawn out, like being exposed to war, domestic violence, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, emotional neglect and abandonment.

WHAT IS TRAUMA

- Traumatic experiences are very common, The national Drug and Alcohol Research Centre estimates 3 out of every 4 of us have or will experience a traumatic event during our lifetime.

WHAT IS TRAUMA

- Experiencing trauma in childhood can have a severe and long-lasting effect. When childhood trauma is not resolved, a sense of fear and helplessness carries over into adulthood, setting the stage for further trauma.

TRAUMA AND ADDICTION

- As children move into adolescence/early adulthood they will often experiment with substances such as alcohol and other drugs. If that substance eases the pain in some way then the stage is set for repeated behaviour.

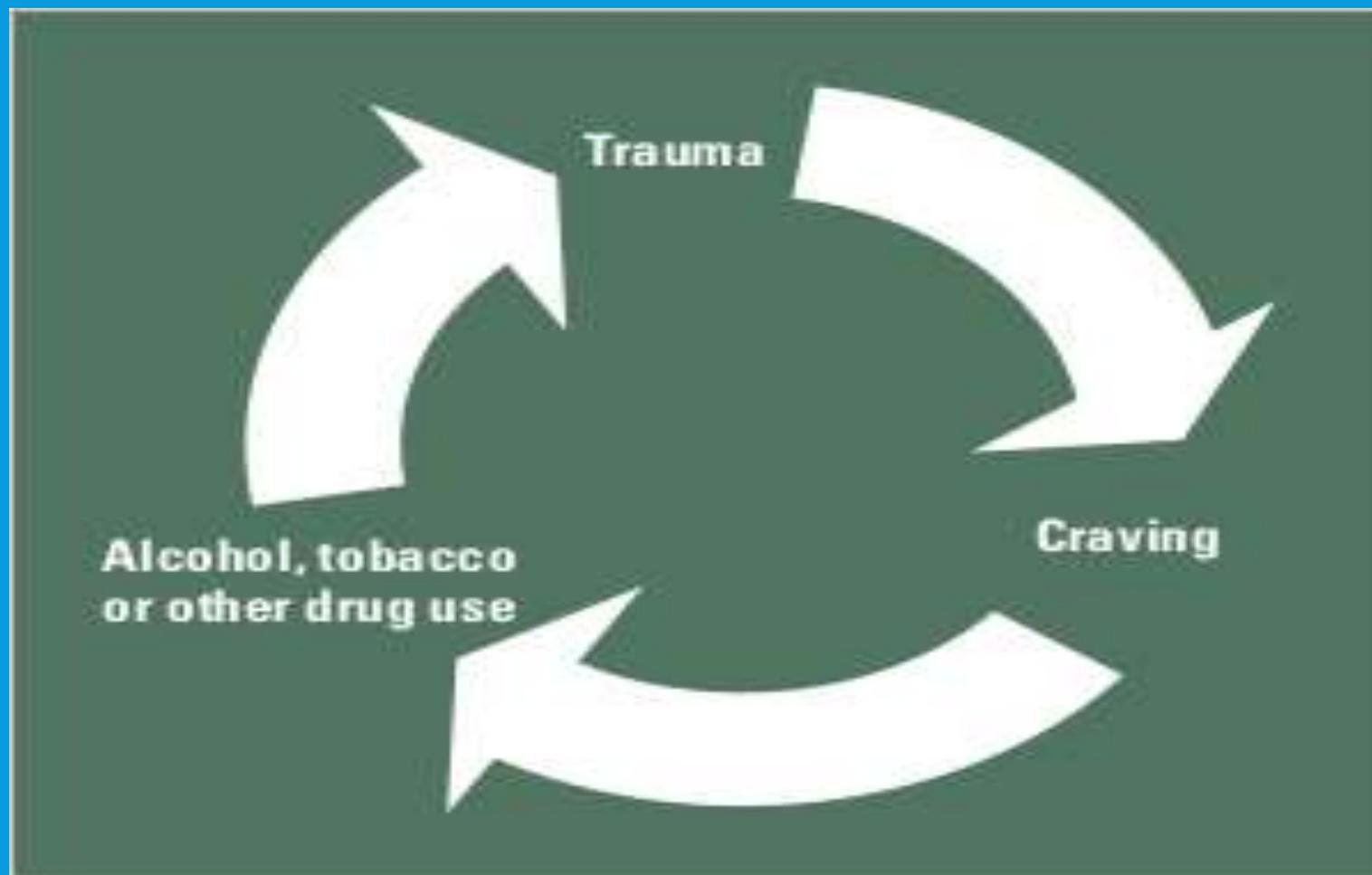
TRAUMA AND ADDICTION

- In its simplest form: the drug releases dopamine's, user feels good, feels rewarded, brain registers this is a good way to feel good quickly and at the same time block out that underlying pain caused from trauma. User repeats behaviour and soon a neural pathway is laid down.
- The fact that the user has experienced early trauma makes them more susceptible to repeating the action.

TRAUMA AND ADDICTION

The user has set up a pattern of behaviour.

- Experienced trauma
- Craves release from emotional pain
- Uses substances, including food, gambling or sex (addictive processes)
- Feels more traumatised because of addictive process
- Craves release from emotional pain and release from potential physical dependence symptoms
- Uses more substances to numb pain
- ADDICTION IS CAUSED



TRAUMA CREATED BY ADDICTION

- When a person is using a substance or behaviour addictively they often experience more trauma. This trauma may be caused by putting themselves in dangerous situations, behaving in a way that does not reflect their moral compass, feeling psychologically unstable due to the cocktail of chemicals and experiences.

TRAUMA CREATED BY ADDICTION

- Many of my clients have reported to me that during their addictions they felt unsafe for prolonged periods of time. Believing that it felt like touch and go whether they emerged from their addiction alive or not

ADDICTION PRESENTING LIKE IT CAUSES PTSD

- These same clients expressed to me that their addiction had caused them to feel like they were surviving in what felt like near or close to death like situations often for extended periods of time. Once they got into recovery they were easily triggered back (experienced flashbacks) to the past where in the present moment they were re-experiencing feelings, thoughts, emotions and senses that belonged to past experiences

ADDICTION PRESENTING LIKE IT CAUSES PTSD

- These flashbacks would cause them to become breathless, agitated, have sweaty palms and feel like they were like a terrified rabbit caught in the headlights. They would go to great lengths to avoid people and situations that reminded them of these experiences. Often they would describe nightmares and actually be so afraid of these nightmares that they had developed insomnia. Hearing these descriptions made me wonder if they were suffering from PTSD and go on to explore what had caused it.

ADDICTION PRESENTING LIKE IT CAUSES PTSD

- This cohort of clients were emphatic that they had never experienced anything prior to their addiction that could have caused PTSD and had not experienced anything during their addiction that would normally be classed as having precipitated PTSD such as surviving the following:-

NORMAL DIAGNOSTIC EVENTS FOR CAUSING PTSD

- Serious road accidents
- Violent personal assaults, such as sexual assault, mugging or robbery
- Prolonged sexual abuse, violence or severe neglect
- Witnessing violent deaths
- Military combat
- Being held hostage
- Terrorist attacks
- Natural disasters, such as severe floods, earthquakes or tsunamis
- A diagnosis of a life-threatening condition
- An unexpected severe injury or death of a close family member or friend
- Rape

CAN ADDICTION CAUSE PTSD

What they had all experienced was original childhood trauma of some description.

It may have been one or more of the following

- Insecure attachment to their primary caregiver
- Family violence
- Parental divorce
- Drug or alcohol abuse in the family
- Death of a parent
- An experience of physical or sexual abuse that was not ongoing
- Emotional neglect



TREATING TRAUMA

- It is important when working with this client group to understand the nature of their trauma in order to provide the best type of treatment. If it is PTSD they are suffering from then they may benefit from specific PTSD treatment such as EMDR (eye movement and desensitisation reprocessing), Trauma Focussed CBT, psychodynamic therapy and/or medication

TREATING TRAUMA

- It is also important when working with this client group to understand the nature of their trauma in order for them to be able to make links between their childhood experiences and their self harming habits.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH IMPORTANT

- “When people are having problems,” Dr Robert Anda, author of the ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) study, states, “it’s time to stop asking what’s wrong with them, and start asking what happened to them.”

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH SO IMPORTANT

- It is my hope to be able to research this subject further so that we the counsellors, therapists, doctors and nurses have a clearer understanding of what it is we are treating. If we treat the drug, alcohol or sex problem we are missing the point. That behaviour is a symptom of a much deeper underlying hurt. It is difficult sometimes to feel compassion for 'addicts' as they behave in what we often feel are reprehensible ways in order to get their 'fix'. This behaviour is not excusable but when we see and understand the hurt underneath it is easier to separate the person from the behaviour.

