

# **Chapter 1**

## **Understanding Childhood Trauma**

Tucked away in one of our closets are boxes of sports memorabilia my husband has held onto for decades. He grew up a fan of all sports, but in particular, a baseball guy. His favorite team growing up was the St. Louis Cardinals. That's because his grandfather was a big Cardinals fan. What I did not know about those early days or any of the memories attached to the memorabilia he still has was the importance of a particular book held in his past.

My husband was raised without his biological dad, who was serving in the United States Army during those early years, stationed in Germany. His mom had full-time employment, so most of his days and nights were spent at his grandparent's (Nanny & Pa) house. There, he became attached to Pa, his constant companion, best friend, and father figure. There was a problem, however. Pa was an alcoholic and a child molester, so my husband was constantly bombarded with sexual abuse early on. From the age of four, at least, that is about how far back he can remember, until the age of seven when the family moved to a town sixty miles away, my husband was victimized. The irony is that the only person he bonded with as a small child was the person he was most afraid of during those early years. To this day, he can recall many nights when he and Pa were nestled in a La-Z-Boy chair, Nanny was asleep in another room, and Pa was doing things that created confusion and fear in my husband. He would eventually put up a fight, wiggle out of the grasp of his Pa, and run over to an area of the living room he felt safe in. He would always grab the same baseball book and sit there, trying to ignore Pa's coaxing. To this day, my husband would tell you that the sight of that baseball almanac still brings mixed emotions.

In this chapter, we will define childhood trauma, describe its impact on children over time, and discuss the Neuroscience underlying it. Trauma is not just some random event that has happened in our past. It feels more like a wound we do not know is even there. It has this subtle yet powerful influence on how we develop as children and, just as importantly, how we think, feel, and interact with others as adults. Trauma left unresolved removes our ability to discover our true selves.

### ***Defining Childhood Trauma***

Childhood trauma refers to experiences in a child's life that can impair their ability to cope with situations and process their emotions, leaving psychological, emotional, and even physical scars that persist into adulthood (Van der Kolk, 2014). Unlike the ordinary stressors a child might face in their day-to-day activities, trauma can disrupt their sense of stability and safety.

So, what is a traumatic event? According to the American Psychological Association website (<https://www.apa.org>), a traumatic event is a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses bodily harm or a threat to a child's life or a loved one. Another name for such events that is used descriptively is Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These are traumatic events that happen to children from the time of birth until the age of 17. They can lead to lifelong health complications, which may include mental health conditions, chronic physical maladies, and substance use.

The Center for Disease Control and medical giant Kaiser Permanente ran a study from 1995-1997 on the effects of child abuse and neglect (Felitti et al., 1998). The study found ten different types of traumas that typically impact most victims. They coined Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) to describe these occurrences. The 10 ACEs of trauma, according to their study outcomes, are:

- Physical Abuse
- Emotional Abuse
- Sexual Abuse,
- Physical Neglect
- Emotional Neglect
- Mental Illness in a family member
- Divorce of parents
- Substance abuse in their environment
- Domestic Violence
- Having a loved one incarcerated

There are additional concepts we can place alongside that list, including bullying, living in a war-torn area, acts of terrorism, shootings, accidents, and natural disasters. It is estimated that 60%–80% of adults in the United States have experienced at least one type of ACE. Many of us experienced multiple ACEs in our childhood. This is unsettling to me due to the number of ACEs I have been exposed to. What about you? How many of these events define your childhood?

### ***Trauma's Impact Over Time***

I wondered for many years what was wrong with me. I tended to internalize fear much more than others; I avoided situations and events that reminded me of past negative experiences. I would be indecisive and lean on others for direction when it was not necessary. Then, I

discovered what the signs of an adverse childhood experience were. It read like the story of my life as a young adult. The list of outcomes found in the CDC Kaiser Permanente study included:

- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Depression, Anxiety, Suicide
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Phobias
- Mood and eating disorders
- Unintended Pregnancy
- Substance Use
- Lower Educational, Occupational, and Income levels

This was a lightbulb moment in my life. I realized there were underlying causes for the struggles I was enduring, and more importantly, they were the result of things done to me—not things I had planned for and created myself. My perspective changed, as I understood for the first time that I was not to blame. As you look at your past, can you see the same scenario in your life? Do you understand you are not at fault for what others have done to you?

### ***Understanding the Underlying Neuroscience***

Neuroscience is the scientific study of the nervous system, including the brain, the spinal cord, and the peripheral nervous system. Taking a brief look at the science behind childhood trauma will help explain what is happening to us because of the abuse we have incurred in the past. When trauma occurs in our childhood, brain scans show a marked difference in brain development, affecting neural pathways and causing symptoms of chronic stress like physical illness, hormonal imbalances, and mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Lippard et al.; C. B., 2019).

The triune brain model developed by neuroscientist Paul D. MacLean (MacLean, P. D. (1990) further explains what is going on when we are exposed to childhood trauma. His theory holds that the brain is divided into three parts, from simple to complex. They are:

- **Reptilian Brain:** This part of our brain manages autonomic body processes like breathing, hunger, and thirst. It is also where our survival instincts are located.

- **Mammalian Brain:** This part of the brain manages the limbic system, which regulates our emotions and attachment styles.
- **Neomammalian Brain:** This part of our brain manages learning, memory, decision-making, sensory processing, and complex problem-solving.

When we experience trauma, the brain shuts down all non-essential activities and moves us into the lower brain systems. This movement activates the sympathetic nervous system and signals the release of stress hormones, preparing us for survival mode: fight-or-flight or freeze-or-fawn responses to the trauma-induced event. Once the trauma event has passed, the parasympathetic nervous system returns, allowing our brain to resume regular activity with all three parts. As you can imagine, a single event would likely allow a quicker return to normalcy of brain activity. Whereas a chronic pattern of trauma, which many of us have experienced, increases the difficulty of returning to normal brain functions. We are kept under stress and unable to relax and be normal children.

Here are the brain's reactions to what could be considered fearful situations or extended periods of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Which response do you see in yourself?

- The **Fight** response is exhibited through a temper outburst that may be unpredictable and even explosive. This is the aggressive yell or scream, the slamming of doors, and always feeling threatened. So, protection at all costs is the mantra.
- The **Flight** response feels easily trapped by its situation. This response style has a history of abruptly ending relationships out of fear, rushing around, and avoiding any downtime for reflection.
- The **Freeze** response shuts down with complete avoidance. This style struggles with what is real or unreal. There is a tendency to hide out, procrastinate, and often give up.
- The **Fawn** response, which I have experienced the most in my life, is associated with being a people-pleaser, having a fear of saying 'no,' being overly polite and agreeable, and unduly reliant on others to help solve problems.

While traumatic events can cause harm to us at any age, the trauma we experience as children is much more severe. During those early years, our brains are still developing. Specifically, adverse childhood experiences target our hippocampus (memory), areas of the brain that help us think logically (prefrontal cortex), and our amygdala (where we process emotions). All of this can be overwhelming when we first understand it. However, there is hope. As we will discover in a later chapter, rewiring the brain is possible. The term used for such work is *Neuroplasticity*. I know it can happen due to my life experience and because I have witnessed it in the lives of others in my circle of influence. It can happen to you, too.

## ***The Importance of Attachment Styles***

Another area that impacts us through childhood trauma is our attachment style in relationships. John Bowlby founded attachment style theory in the 1950s (Bowlby, J. 1969), and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth, et. al. 1978). later expanded upon it. Attachment theory outlines how our primary caregivers bonded with us, which sets the foundation for how we will navigate relationships throughout our lives. The research by Ainsworth categorized four different types of attachment styles. They are:

- **Secure:** This style can regulate emotions, easily trust others, have practical communication skills, be comfortable in relationships, manage conflict well, and seek emotional support.
- **Avoidant:** This style avoids emotional or physical intimacy, is independent, is uncomfortable expressing feelings, is dismissive of others, and feels threatened easily.
- **Anxious:** This style has low self-esteem, feels unworthy of love, needs approval from others, is highly sensitive to criticism, and has a significant fear of abandonment.
- **Disorganized:** This style fears rejection, has high levels of anxiety, has difficulty trusting others, and exhibits signs of both the avoidant and anxious attachment styles.

Before closing this chapter, I want to touch on another measurement of childhood trauma. These would be the categories of childhood trauma. Clinicians classify trauma in one of the following ways:

- **Acute Trauma:** This refers to a single event that is more than what the child can cope with. Examples would include accidents, witnessing violence, or a natural disaster.
- **Chronic Trauma:** This would result from prolonged exposure to harmful events. Examples would include domestic violence and repeated physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. These would be areas that disrupt the development of a child.
- **Complex Trauma:** This would result from a child being exposed to multiple forms of abuse, profoundly impacting the child's emotional state, development, and safety.

In conclusion, our understanding of childhood trauma is the foundation for moving forward. We have seen how impactful trauma can be, and we have lived lives that validate that idea. As adult survivors, our goals must include looking at our past, acknowledging the pain, comforting the inner child, reframing our self-perception and self-esteem, and creating a course of correction that provides a voice to our present state and hope for our future. We were not designed to be victims. We were intended to be gifts to the world around us. I look forward to our healing journey together. We now need to look at how trauma lingers into adulthood.

## ***Key Takeaways***

- Trauma left unresolved removes our ability to discover our true selves.
- Unlike ordinary stressors in a child's day-to-day life, trauma disrupts their sense of stability and safety
- The list of outcomes from childhood trauma can include brain injury, depression, anxiety, PTSD, phobias, and substance use.
- Brain scans exhibit a marked difference for those impacted by childhood trauma.
- The results of a traumatic event in the life of a child include the release of stress hormones, which prepare us for the fight or flight or freeze or fawn responses.
- Childhood trauma targets our hippocampus (memory), areas of the brain that help us think logically (prefrontal cortex) and our amygdala (where we process our emotions).
- Attachment theory outlines how our primary caregivers bonded with us.

# Chapter 1 Journal

1. If you could go back in time, what would be the one thing you would most want to change about your childhood?

[illegible]

# Chapter 1 Journal

2. What will be most difficult to discuss during your healing journey?

[illegible]



# Chapter 1 Journal

3. Were there times in your childhood when you internalized feelings of shame or guilt? Do you think this shaped the way you view yourself today?

[illegible]

# Chapter 1 Journal

4. One of my favorite songs is entitled “Dear Younger Me”, which is about being able to talk to our younger self. If you could do that, what would you say to yourself?

[illegible]

## Chapter 1 Exercise

When my husband was working through his childhood trauma, he decided to create what he called "A life map." He drew every year he could remember on paper with the corresponding months. He then attached his memories to the correct date on the map. It looked like this:

<b>1978</b>	<b>Jan</b>	<b>Feb</b>	<b>Mar</b>	<b>April</b>	<b>May</b>	<b>June</b>	<b>July</b>	<b>Aug</b>	<b>Sep</b>	<b>Oct</b>	<b>Nov</b>	<b>Dec</b>
	Event		Event		Event		Event		Event		Event	

Under each of the months, he would place events that were attached to what he believed were trauma. It helped him to recall what was in his subconscious memory. Maybe you could do the same. You can call it your trauma timeline.

## Chapter 1 Worksheet

One of the hardest things to do is to recall those memories of pain and abuse. It is difficult for those just starting their healing journey, much less to talk about. On the worksheet below, identify the areas of trauma you have been exposed to. If you can, write how that impacted you.

ACE Event	Your Reflection on the event
Physical Abuse	
Emotional Abuse	
Sexual Abuse	
Physical Neglect	
Emotional Neglect	
Mental Illness in Family	
Parents' Divorce	
Substance Use in the Home	
Domestic Violence	
Loved One Incarcerated	
Bullying	
Other	