

Loving a Trauma Survivor: Understanding Childhood Trauma's Impact On Relationships

Robyn E. Brickel, MA, LMFT

Survivors of childhood trauma deserve all the peace and security that a loving relationship can provide. But a history of abuse or neglect can make trusting another person feel terrifying. Trying to form an intimate relationship may lead to frightening missteps and confusion.

How can we better understand the impact of trauma, and help survivors find the love, friendship and support they and their partner deserve?

How People Cope With Unresolved Trauma

Whether the trauma was physical, sexual, or emotional, the impact can show up in a host of relationship issues. Survivors often believe deep down that no one can really be trusted, that intimacy is dangerous, and for them, a real loving attachment is an impossible dream. Many tell themselves they are flawed, not good enough and unworthy of love. Thoughts like these can wreak havoc in relationships throughout life.

When early childhood relationships are sources of overwhelming fear, or when absent, insecure or disorganized attachment leaves a person feeling helpless and alone, the mind needs some way to cope. A child may latch onto thoughts like:

Don't trust, it's not safe!

Don't reach out, don't be a burden to anyone!

Don't dwell on how you feel, just move along!

These ideas may help a person cope when they hurt so badly every day and just need to survive. But they do not help the emerging adult make sense of their inner world or learn how to grow and relate to others. Even if the survivor finds a safe, loving partner later in life, the self-limiting scripts stay with them. They cannot just easily toss them and start over. These life lessons are all they have (so far) to survive the best way they know how.

Noticing Trauma's Impact On Behavior and Mood

Many times, trauma survivors re-live childhood experiences with an unresponsive or abusive partner (an important topic for another article). This often happens without the ability to see the reasons why they feel compelled to pursue unhealthy relationships. Beneath awareness is a drive to revisit unresolved trauma, and finally make things right. Of course, childhood wounds cannot be repaired this way unless there are two willing partners working on changing those cycles. But if these forces remain unnoticed, survivors can get caught in a cycle of abuse.

Even with a safe partner, a trauma survivor may:

Experience depression

Develop compulsive behavior, an eating disorder, or substance dependence to try and regulate their emotions

Have flashbacks or panic attacks

Feel persistent self-doubt

Have suicidal thoughts

Seek or carry out the adverse behavior they experienced as a child

Partners of trauma survivors may want desperately to help. But partners need to "be clear that it is not your problem to fix and you don't have the power to change another human being," says Lisa Ferentz, LCSW in a post for partners of trauma survivors. Rather, know that both of you deserve to connect with resources to help you find comfort and healing.

Seeing Trauma's Impact On Relationships

It is important to recognize unhealed trauma as a dynamic force in an intimate relationship. It can supercharge emotions, escalate issues, and make it seem impossible to communicate effectively. Issues become complicated by:

- Heightened reactions to common relationship issues
- Emotionally fueled disagreements
- Withdrawal or distant, unresponsive behavior
- Aversion to conflict and inability to talk through issues
- Assumptions that the partner is against them when it is not the case
- Lingering doubt about a partner's love and faithfulness
- Difficulty accepting love, despite repeated reassurance

In a relationship, a history of trauma is not simply one person's problem to solve. Anything that affects one partner impacts the other and the relationship. With guidance from therapy, partners begin to see how to untangle the issues.

Many people do not even realize that they have had traumatic experiences. Trauma-informed therapy works by helping couples begin to see how they experienced traumatic abuse or neglect, and how it still affects them, and impacts their current relationships. This approach enables the therapist to provide specific insights to help couples separate past issues from present ones. Progress often comes more readily through a combination of individual sessions and work as a couple.

Trauma-informed therapy helps partners give each other the gift of what I and other therapists call psychoeducation – learning to understand each individual's story, how it impacts their relationship, and how to process thoughts and emotions in healthier ways.

The Importance of Self-Care For Trauma Survivors and Their Partners

Trauma survivors and their partners have different needs for support. How can one respond when the other is grappling with mental health issues? How do you calm things down when overwhelming emotions get triggered?

It takes therapy for couples to find answers that are most healing for them. But some general tips for trauma survivors and their partners that can help are:

- Have a really good support system for each of you and the relationship.
- Make time for family and friends who are positive about your relationship and respect you and your loved one.
- Find a trauma-informed therapist to guide you as a couple or as individuals in your effort to better understand yourselves and each other.
- Find resources outside of therapy such as support groups or other similar activities

Take time for psychoeducation. Learn about the nature of trauma, self-care and healing techniques like mindfulness. For example, one helpful model is Stan Taktin's "couple bubble." This is a visual aid to help partners see how to become a more secure, well-functioning couple. Surrounding yourself and your partner with an imaginary bubble "means that the couple is aware in public and in private they protect each other at all times. They don't allow either of them to be the third wheel for very long, at least not without repair. In this way, everybody actually fares much better." See More Helpful Resources below.

Communication Tips for Partners of Trauma Survivors

Building a healthy bond with a trauma survivor means working a lot on communication. Grappling with relationship issues can heighten fear and may trigger flashbacks for someone with a history of trauma.

Learning how to manage communication helps couples restore calm and provide comfort as their understanding of trauma grows. For example, couples can:

Use self-observation to recognize when to slow down or step back as feelings escalate
Practice mindfulness to raise awareness and recognize triggers for each of you
Develop some phrases to help you stay grounded in the present and re-direct your dialog, such as:

“I wonder if we can slow this down.

“It seems like we’re getting triggered. Can we figure out what’s going on with us?”

“I wonder if we are heading into old territory.”

“I’m thinking this could be something we should talk about in therapy.”

“I wonder if we could try and stay grounded in what is going on for us – is that possible?”

Communication can also help a partner comfort a loved one during a flashback. Techniques include:

Reminding the person that he or she is safe.

Calling attention to the here and now (referencing the present date, location and other immediate sights and sounds).

Offering a glass of water, which can help stop a flashback surprisingly well. (It activates the salivary glands, which in turn stimulates the behavior-regulating prefrontal cortex.)

Healing childhood wounds takes careful, hard work. But it is possible to replace old rules bit by bit. Finding a therapist who can recognize and acknowledge the hurt, which the survivor has carried alone for so long, is key to repairing deep wounds.

Partners may decide to work individually with their own trauma-informed therapist, while working with another as a couple, to provide the resources they need. When a survivor of early trauma can finally find comforting connection with a therapist, and then with their partner, the relationship between the couple can begin to support deep healing as well.

The more we understand about the impact of trauma, the more we can help those touched by it to go beyond surviving, and find the healing security of healthier loving relationships.

More Helpful Resources

Articles and Websites

“Helping a Partner Who Engages in Self-Destructive Behaviors” by Lisa Ferentz, LCSW

“Trauma-Informed Care; Understanding the Many Challenges of Toxic Stress” by Robyn Brickel, M.A., LMFT

Sidran Institute (resources for traumatic stress education and advocacy)

Books

Wired for Love: How Understanding Your Partner’s Brain and Attachment Style Can Help You Defuse Conflict and Build a Secure Relationship by Stan Tatkin, PsyD, MFT

Allies in Healing: When the Person You Love Was Sexually Abused As a Child by Laura Davis

Trust After Trauma: A Guide to Relationships for Survivors and Those Who Love Them by Aphrodite Matsakis

Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation by Daniel Siegel