

What is Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?

Physical trauma can be as a result of an injury or something which caused an injury. Psychological trauma can be anything that causes a psychological 'injury', generally these are things such as; a physical or sexual assault, a road traffic accident or a natural disaster. These events are usually unexpected and highly distressing. As a result, we are left feeling overwhelmed and psychologically distressed. This psychological trauma can leave us with unwanted memories, flashbacks and nightmares, avoiding anything that reminds us of the event or feeling tense and depressed. When we experience a trauma, it is normal to respond in these ways, however, if these feelings continue for more than a few months then they may be the sign of 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.'

Complex trauma is identified as different because some people experience multiple traumas over long periods of time. These can include childhood physical, sexual or emotional abuse, child neglect, domestic abuse and torture. With complex trauma we may experience similar responses to those mentioned above, however, we may also experience difficulties with sense of self, controlling overwhelming emotions and, difficulties in relationships.

What causes complex trauma?

As children we need to have our basic needs taken care of, however we also have psychological needs such as the need to feel loved and accepted, safe to explore the world and meet other people, support when we get into trouble or need help and routine.

Parents and carers are supposed to meet these needs for us in early life, helping us learn how to do this in adult life. If we miss out on these we may find it difficult in later life to manage difficult situations. Adults have similar psychological needs to children and even with happy, loving childhoods, situations such domestic abuse or violence can test our psychological wellbeing. The more trauma's we experience the more severe our psychological problems may be; however, we can recover from these.

Difficulties with sense of self

- Complex trauma affects how we think, feel, and behave towards ourselves. We may come to believe we are 'bad' or 'worthless' if we are told so by others.
- Sometimes, we go along with what other people tell us about ourselves because this makes our situation more bearable.
- This can lead us to feeling in control, as though we would only need to change ourselves. When we can't change ourselves we may start to believe that we deserve to be treated in a particular way.
- Doing so means we start to criticise ourselves, or even punish ourselves.

Difficulties with overwhelming feelings

- If we have positive role models then we may learn healthy ways to manage our emotions.
- When we experience mistreatment (such as abuse) or we are left to cope alone then we may never learn to cope with our emotions
- With no guidance we may turn to unhealthy ways to cope with our emotions such as self harm, substance abuse and aggression.
- At times these things may feel as though they are helping us manage our feelings, however, they can turn into problems in their own way.
- When someone has tried numerous ways to regulate their emotions they may move to numb themselves from all emotions. It is common to use expressions such as 'dead inside' or 'zoned out' when describing this.

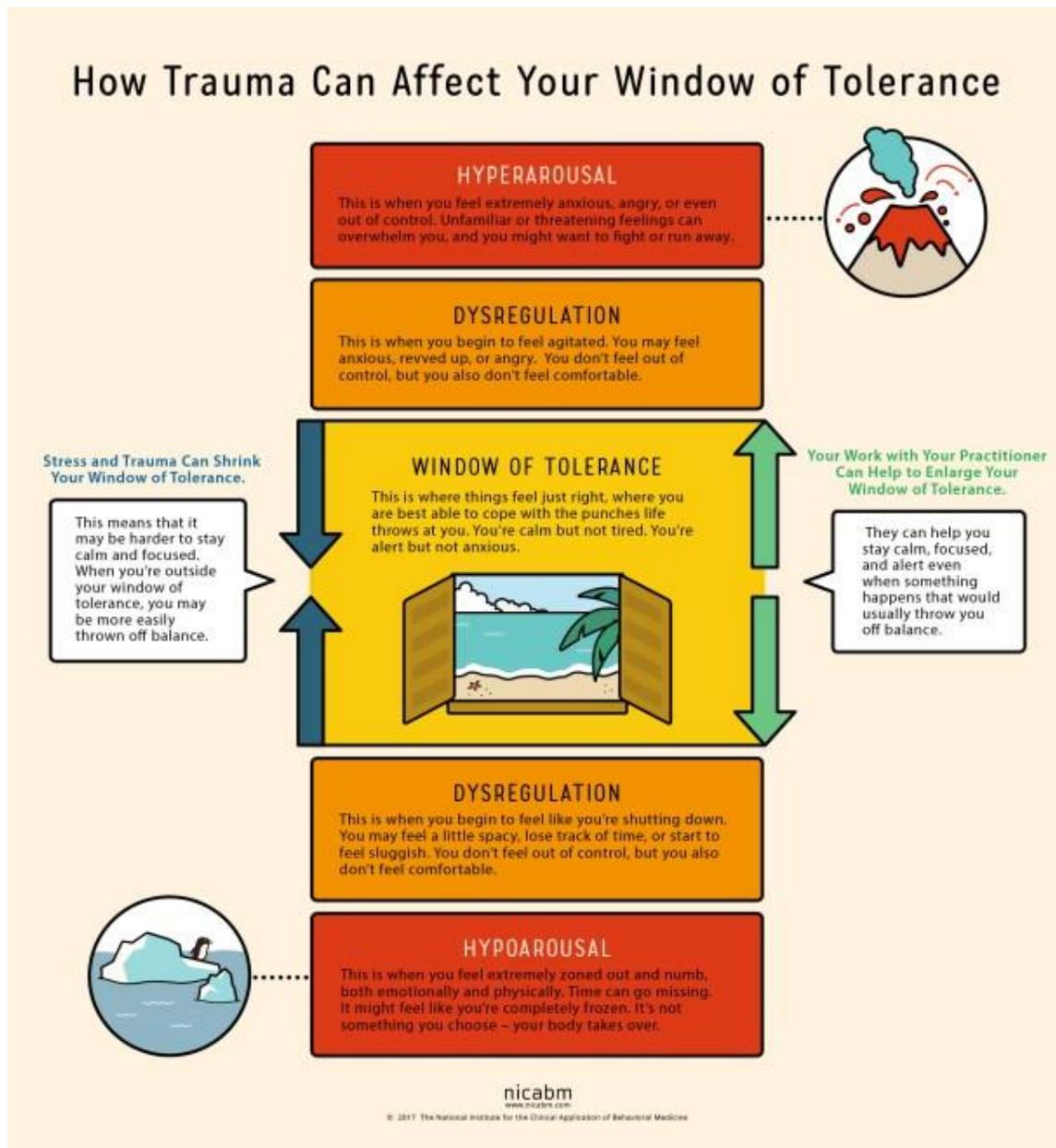
Difficulties in relationships

- Experiences in our past can influence how we trust others.
- We may feel safer by keeping others at a distance, meaning we attack others or completely avoid them.
- Many individuals who experience CPTSD describe feeling separate to others and as though they are unable to connect with others.
- At the same time there may be a sense of fear when coping alone and wanting someone else around to help feel safe.



Dissociation is similar to the 'numbing out' described above. It can become a problem when it becomes an automatic response and leads us to block out the positive things in our lives as well as the negative. It can also get in the way of our day to day functioning and relationships.

The Window of Tolerance



Taken from: <http://www.debbieaugenthaler.com/window-of-tolerance/>

A person's window of tolerance decreases with repeated trauma and as a result there may be emotional dysregulation, reduced relational abilities, reduced attention, negative beliefs about the self and increased distress.

The aim of therapy is to increase the window of tolerance and thus emotional resilience and relationships.



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