

Key concepts in 2 mins

Trauma



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Trauma is a concept with a specific meaning - we should use it only for that purpose.

It is concerning when a concept is overused - it usually loses its accurate meaning and potency. The concept of trauma falls into this category. Whether we use it to describe a child who is angry or an adult who is upset, the word trauma crops up all over the place.

A child's anger may well stem from a traumatic experience, as might an adult's tears. Importantly, though, they may not. Feelings or states of mind that are difficult, or even overwhelming, are not necessarily traumatic.

What is trauma?

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It is generally accepted that a traumatic experience is so overwhelming that the person cannot cope with it, process it. It is deeply distressing or frightening and will impact long term on the person's life.

Later situations may trigger a traumatic experience and cause what might seem like an overreaction. For example, if a parent suddenly leaves the family home and the child experiences it as traumatic, they may react strongly to future comings and goings.

Key points about trauma:

- *Trauma is complex*

It is not an everyday term that is easy to understand. It is complicated to define, diagnose, and treat.

- *Trauma is about how a person experiences a specific situation*

For instance, an experience or situation that one sibling experiences as traumatic, may not be so for another.

- *An experience of trauma is out of ordinary in its severity*

Trauma is not on the scale of a day-to-day upset and distress, but far more powerful.

- *It may help to speak about trauma to a professional, though not necessarily*

Whilst talking it through can work wonders for some, talking about a trauma may be like scratching at a wound for others. Working with trauma is delicate work requiring informed assessment and responses.

- *Trauma requires the intervention of trained specialists and professionals.*

A trauma can get worse if a person without appropriate training and expertise intervenes.

When working with children.

We need to know that diagnosing whether the child is upset or traumatised can be difficult.

Some things to look out for:

- *The intensity of the child's reaction*

Traumatic responses tend to be stronger and more prolonged than usual upset.

- *Changes in behaviour*

If the child is unusually withdrawn, aggressive, angry, or showing signs of regression they may be experiencing trauma.

- *Physical symptoms*

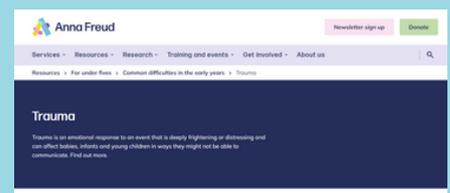
As with most psychological disturbance, trauma can express itself on the body. Practitioners should be mindful of recurring physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach aches. Or, similarly, any changes in the child's eating, sleeping, communication and toileting.

Any practitioner who is concerned that a child may be experiencing trauma should discuss it with their manager and the child's parents.

It is always important to make a referral for *specialist* intervention.

Further reading:

The Anna Freud centre: [online information about trauma](#)



The Tavistock and Portman NHS foundation trust: [information on trauma](#)

