

How Trauma Affects People with Intellectual Disabilities



"I am a survivor of sexual trauma, not just once, but three times in my life. I don't think many people really know how often people like me get abused, or how hard it is to get help. People at The Arc and counselors helped a lot, they helped me learn how to overcome. I want other people with disabilities to know they can find help and become a survivor like me."

James Meadours, Leader
in the self-advocacy field

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What Is Trauma?

Emotional and psychological trauma is the result of extraordinarily stressful events that shatter a person's sense of security, creating a feeling of helplessness and vulnerability in a dangerous world. Traumatic experiences often involve a threat to life or safety, but any situation that leaves someone feeling overwhelmed and alone can be traumatic, even if it doesn't involve physical harm. It's not the objective facts that determine whether an event is traumatic, but the person's subjective emotional experience of the event. The more frightened and helpless one feels, the more likely he or she has been traumatized.

During a traumatic event, people with intellectual disabilities may experience intense fears and feelings of helplessness beyond their normal coping capacity. Examples of traumatic events include sexual assault, physical assault, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters such as earthquakes. Auto accidents, medical/surgical crisis, threats, bullying or belittling behavior from others and loss of loved ones can also be traumatic events.

Trauma can be one major "big T" event, or it might be a number of "smaller t" events affecting an individual over a period of time. Examples of "smaller t" incidents might include feeling different, feeling unaccepted and not part of a group, and being unable to do what others can do. All trauma is stressful, but not all stress is traumatic. When stress is managed effectively, it is part of the means by which successful learning and adjustment to what happened occurs. Response to stress is individual and what is traumatic for one person may not be for another. Resilience, the ability to positively cope with stress and catastrophe, is individual.

How Often Do People with Intellectual Disabilities Experience Trauma?

Due to the broad definition of the trauma, it is difficult to measure how

often people experience trauma. However, based on data taken from the 2007 National Crime Victim Survey, people with disabilities age 12 and over are 50 percent more likely to experience violent crime, which is often associated with the experience of trauma. Victims with cognitive disabilities (like intellectual and developmental disabilities) were more likely to experience nonfatal violent crime than those with other types of disabilities. Given these findings, along with other research pointing to the common experience of various types of abuse among those with intellectual disabilities, it is likely that people with intellectual disabilities are highly susceptible to experience trauma throughout their lifetimes.

What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

The two disorders related to trauma include Acute Traumatic Stress Disorder (ATSD) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). ATSD is a psychological disorder that occurs within 30 days of a traumatic event. Treatment of ATSD can lessen an individual's chance of developing PTSD. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychological disorder that results when one or more traumatic events occur and exceed the per-

son's ability to cope. A traumatic stress disorder can be mild and transient or severely disabling.

Why Is It Important to Diagnose Trauma?

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities experience similar kinds of trauma as other people without disabilities and in some cases, because of their vulnerability, may experience quite different forms of trauma. Obtaining an accurate diagnosis is important in order to distinguish trauma symptoms from psychotic symptoms. It's also important to keep in mind that PTSD may co-occur with autism, ADHD, phobias, general anxiety disorder and/or depression among other conditions. Assessment for an accurate diagnosis is critical because appropriate treatment can be highly effective. Family members, support staff and others who know an individual well and are trained about trauma may recognize the signs and symptoms of a traumatic stress disorder in an individual with intellectual disabilities. Referral to a licensed mental health clinician that has experience in working with people with intellectual disabilities for an assessment is an essential step in determining if the person has a traumatic stress disorder.

What Signs Point to Possible Traumatization?

- New disruptive behaviors suddenly appear (examples include aggressive or avoidant behaviors)
- Attention seeking behaviors
- Reoccurrence of previously displayed disruptive behaviors, or an increase in frequency and severity of these behaviors
- Nightmares and flashbacks; hyperactivity, headaches, stomachaches, back pain
- Sleeplessness, over-alertness, concentration problems, short-temperedness
- Lack of energy and enthusiasm for doing the things typically enjoyed
- Excessive fear of others, or worries about who is working on specific shifts in their home, at work, place of employment or at their day program
- Repetition of statements about a certain event that may seem to be unrelated
- Appearance of being distracted, preoccupied
- Phobic mannerisms, person avoids situations that trigger unpleasant sensations or memories
- Attempts at "self-soothing" behaviors, which might include alcohol, overeating or other addictive behaviors
- A decline in skill development where there had been prior gains

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- Questions about sexuality or reproduction that seem to come from nowhere
- Onset of bedwetting or bowel accidents
- Changes in sleep and eating patterns; social isolation, irritability

Does Treatment Really Help?

Absolutely! Highly effective treatment is available, even when verbal language is limited. Just like other treatments and clients without disabilities, not all people will respond to all therapies. Here are a few benefits victims with intellectual disabilities can experience:

- Physical, as well as psychological, well-being—brain scans reveal that traumatic memory is coded and stored in the brain differently than normal memory. In fact, brain scans can show when trauma has been effectively treated.
- Increase in overall quality of life
- Possibility of needing less intensive supports and less expensive support plans
- People with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities who also have mental health issues (depression, bipolar disorder, etc.) can often benefit from appropriate psychotherapy.

How Can I Help Victims of Trauma?

It's important to realize that you

don't have to be an expert or psychologist to help, and that learning simple techniques can have a big impact on someone struggling with trauma. Advocates, family members, staff and others can be prepared and respond proactively when they suspect someone they know has been traumatized. The first step is to learn about trauma and traumatic stress disorders, and how to recognize the signs and symptoms of traumatization. Next, learn effective ways of supporting those who've been traumatized, and in particular, the various stabilization techniques that can be used to help the person better manage their symptoms.

It's also important to learn when it is appropriate to make a referral for diagnosis and treatment. Knowledge about effective therapies and treatment, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Thought Field Therapy (TFT), and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) can assist in making effective referrals. EMDR can be the least stressful and most effective of the evidence-based psychotherapies for trauma treatment and does not require high levels of verbal skills from clients. TFT has a very high rate of success in reducing trauma symptoms. Parents and care providers can learn how to

administer TFT Trauma therapy at home to reinforce the success of the treatment experienced in the practitioner's office. Whenever possible, provide and/or advocate that direct support professionals and others involved in the lives of those with disabilities receive training on traumatization and how to respond effectively (referred to as "trauma-informed support").

What Is The Arc's Position?

We believe people with intellectual disabilities must be free from abuse, neglect, or any kind of mistreatment. To read the entire position, visit The Arc's website at www.thearc.org

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