

COMPLEX POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Roma Norriss explains how the transition to parenthood can trigger CPTSD



Before the birth of my first child I longed to meet him, and I felt ready for his arrival. After his birth, however, my body freaked out. Wanting to be taken care of, it generated a uterine infection that left me sweaty and feverish for the first five weeks of my son's life. This was the same duration I had spent in an incubator, separated from my mother, when I was born.

Fast-forward a year or two and being with a toddler was mostly intolerable. The months passed in a blur, but each day was an epic, painstaking marathon, requiring impossible levels of determination. An internal chasm of unresolved feeling prevented me from enjoying this sweet, curious, funny little person. I felt like I was drowning.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is often associated with war veterans or people who have witnessed shocking events. But complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) is something slightly different. It can occur through a longstanding sense of not being seen and upheld by those around us when growing up, or through an accumulation of relatively minor frightening, neglectful or confusing experiences. Things that we tend to normalise – like a parent becoming scary when angry, or never being allowed to express our emotions, or not receiving the attention we really need – can become internalised as complex trauma.

Flashbacks are less visual and more visceral than typical PTSD flashbacks, and we often don't realise we are having one. The limbic system (emotional brain) gets activated, and feelings from the past pervade our thinking. In a flashback we might feel inexplicably distressed, anxious, depressed, irritable, ashamed or alone, even though our current circumstances are, in actual fact, safe and favourable. Indeed, it's when we

feel safe and resourced as adults, that we are able to open up these old feelings.

I see this all the time in my work with parents. Parenting is exhausting and isolating in itself, but if we're feeling wretched and trapped, I'd suggest these feelings are not just about what's happening now. If hearing our baby cry is unbearable, it's possible that it's reminding us of times we were left to cry alone and didn't feel safe. When we can't seem to make friends, or feel connected to anyone, it may be that we are re-experiencing the isolation we felt as young children, when caregivers were not as attuned to us as we needed them to be. When a day with a toddler feels endless – even though we fiercely adore them – it could be a sign that their gestures and behaviours stir up feelings that remain unresolved from our own childhood.

Nobody warns you that becoming a parent is a major trigger for CPTSD, and that, if your start in life was difficult in ways you might not even be aware of, your 'bundle of joy' is going to bring up in you equal amounts of hurt and pleasure. We treat pregnancy as a 'glowing' experience, yet for many of us, it's a time in which we have to face deep-rooted feelings. It can be deeply introspective, disturbing and fraught, and it requires a lot of soul searching. I suspect much postpartum mental illness arises from the triggering of complex trauma.

And then comes the baby. At a time when we are wide open to a 're-experiencing' of our early hurts, the relationships with those around us change, or become challenged, and we face deep readjustment to our new role and place in society. Suddenly we are excluded from places or activities we once enjoyed. It can feel like support and community drop away when we need them most, and as nobody talks about this, each of us believes we are the only one who feels this way, and there must be something wrong with us.

I discovered Hand in Hand Parenting seven years too late, when my eldest was 6. Things had become rather rough by then, so I dived in. A tool I found particularly helpful was Listening Partnerships, where you exchange 'listening time' with another parent. Here I finally found an outlet for the feelings that had been stirred up since pregnancy, which I discovered all stemmed from my own early experiences. Going back through each of the scary or hurtful memories of being a child was

revolutionary. As I cried and raged and shook, and sometimes laughed, I released this old, stored up tension from my body and mind. And everything started to change.

Neurobiologist Dan Siegel talks about the importance of creating a 'coherent biological narrative'. When we have leftover, unresolved issues from childhood, we tend to be fairly jumbled in the way we tell our life story. As we systematically attend to these (and Listening Partnerships are an excellent way to do this) we develop a sense of coherence in our story. This allows us to be more available for connection. (Researchers found they could predict with 85% accuracy a child's attachment status by their parent's life story coherence).

When childhood issues are left unexamined, we tend to either act on autopilot in the way our parents behaved or, because we don't want our child to be hurt the way we were, we overcompensate, and respond the opposite way. In both cases we are acting on a hurt driven compulsion. As I started to recover, I noticed some of my staunch beliefs around parenting melt away. Finally, I could see the sweet, little people that were in front of me, instead of two child-shaped matrices of projected upset. Playfulness and joy ensued that I'd had no idea could have been underneath all those yucky feelings.

We have it back to front when we try to change children's behaviour. Most often it's our response to the behaviour that needs to change. This happens without effort when we attend to our own childhood trauma, with oodles of gentleness and self-forgiveness for, of course, none of this is our fault.

I dedicate this article to all the mothers and fathers, devoting themselves tirelessly each day, whilst wading through a quagmire of their own difficult feelings, often giving a quality of care and attention they themselves never received. It is admirable work to re-parent ourselves alongside parenting our real-time children. The good news is, the security our children feel in relation to us can change as we remove some of the emotional debris that stands in the way. And our enjoyment of our children can soar! ●

Illustration: My Other Half by Lydia Chrysanthou
www.lydiaillustrations.com

IF YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE EXPERIENCING COMPLEX PTSD, HERE ARE SOME WAYS TO WORK WITH IT:

- Become trauma informed; it's less scary when you understand it. I recommend reading *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* by Pete Walker, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* by Peter A. Levine, and *Parenting from the Inside Out: How a Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive* by Dan Siegel.
- Start a Listening Partnership. This peer to peer practice for emotional hygiene and connection is invaluable.

www.handinhandparenting.org

- Recovery takes time. It often feels very unsettling to experience feelings that have been stashed away since childhood. Progress can feel slow. We doubt ourselves. Keeping the faith, surrounding ourselves with people who see our wholeness, is key.

MANAGING AN EMOTIONAL FLASHBACK:

- Educate your loved ones on complex trauma flashbacks, so they can help you spot when you are experiencing one. Clocking what is happening is the first step in recovering. Seeking support allows an opportunity to counter the abuse and neglect we once felt.
- Contain the fearful or negative thinking experienced when in the grip of an emotional flashback. Your mind will make up stories (most likely about yourself or your loved ones) to match the intensity of your feelings. Don't take these at face value, and instead direct plenty of kindness towards yourself.
- Cry if you can. The body recovers through releasing emotion. Listening Partnerships are a clever way to access this inbuilt recovery system.