

The Adult Child: Healing The Wounds that Can't be Seen

Keynote Address

ACA International Convention

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March 1, 2015

Redondo Beach, CA

The Impact of Interpersonal Trauma on Self-Development

Keynote Address, ACA International
Convention

CHILD

Source: conference lecture Stephanie Brown, 1991; S. Brown, Adult Children of Alcoholics: An Expanded Framework for Assessment and Diagnosis, In: S. Abbott, (Ed.) Children of Alcoholics: Selected Readings, Rockville, MD, NACOA, 1995. revised 2004

ENVIRONMENT

- “What it is like.” What happens, what it feels like, what is seen, not seen
- The context of family life. The conditions of trauma
- Includes: atmosphere, mood

ENVIRONMENT

- Changing standards of parental behavior & logic, chronic tension, overt & covert chaos, unpredictability, inconsistency
- Lack of physical & emotional safety; possibly incest & violence
- Unsafe

SYSTEM

- “How it works”; Alcohol: the Central Organizing Principle
- The family structure, including behavior, beliefs & affects that support the pathology of alcoholism/addiction
- Dominated by defense
- Rigid, tightly controlled

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

- Attachment patterns:
 1. Anxious resistant
 2. Anxious avoidant
 3. Chaotic
 4. Secure

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

- Child development often based on role reversal
- Child development organized by defensive adjustment

The Impact of Interpersonal Trauma on Self-Development

ADULT

ENVIRONMENT

- Past unsafe environment & dominance of defense structure basic framework of relationship & attachment pattern to maintain lack of safety

ENVIRONMENT

- Distorts safety & trust in object relationships & interpersonal skills
- Trauma is normalized; the individual may have a need for, and a high vulnerability to stress

SYSTEM

- Distorts role relationships
- Behaviors, beliefs, and affects are structured to maintain pathology
- Interaction patterns including roles, rules, rituals, hierarchies, and regulating mechanisms create interpersonal disorders of hierarchies and boundaries

SYSTEM

- Couples create polarized extremes of dominance and submission. There is role inconsistency, reversal, and triangulation
- Loss of adult self to the preservation of an unhealthy system. Inability to create & maintain reciprocal relationships

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

- Insecure attachment structures couple & family relationships
- A “malevolent interpersonal attitude” (H.S. Sullivan, 1953)
- A “defensive self” structures interpersonal perceptions, behaviors, beliefs, and affects

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

- Defensive interpersonal maneuvers:
 1. Denial
 2. Control
 3. All-or-none thinking
 4. Responsibility

**A New Diagnosis:
Complex Post-traumatic
Stress Disorder**

1. A history of subjection to totalitarian control over a prolonged period (months to years). Examples include hostages, prisoners of war, concentration-camp survivors, and survivors of some religious cults. Examples also include those subject to totalitarian systems in sexual and domestic life, including survivors of domestic battering, childhood physical or sexual abuse, and organized sexual exploitation.

2. Alterations in affect regulation, including:

- persistent dysphoria
- chronic suicidal preoccupation
- self-injury
- explosive or extremely inhibited anger (may alternate)
- compulsive or extremely inhibited sexuality (may alternate)

3. Alternations in consciousness, including:

- amnesia or hypermnesia for traumatic events
- transient dissociative episodes
- depersonalization/derealization
- reliving experiences, either in the form of intrusive post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms or in the form of ruminative preoccupation

4. Alterations in self-perception, including:

- sense of helplessness or paralysis of initiative
- shame, guilt, and self-blame
- sense of defilement or stigma
- sense of complete difference from others (may include sense of specialness, utter aloneness, belief no other person can understand, or non-human identity.)

5. Alterations in perception of perpetrator, including:

- preoccupation with relationship with perpetrator (includes preoccupation with revenge)
- unrealistic attribution of total power to perpetrator (caution: victim's assessment of power realities may be more realistic than clinician's)
- idealization of special or supernatural relationship
- sense of special or supernatural relationship
- acceptance of belief system or rationalizations of perpetrator

6. Alterations in relations with others, including:

- isolation and withdrawal
- disruption in intimate relationships
- repeated search for rescuer (may alternate with isolation and withdrawal)
- persistent distrust
- repeated failures of self-protection

7. Alterations in systems of meaning

- loss of sustaining faith
- sense of hopelessness and despair

Source: Herman, J. Trauma and Recovery. New York: Basic Books, 1992.