

# The Power of Interpersonal Trauma

By *Maureen Gomeringer, MSW, LCSW*

Most often in my practice, I see adult patients who have experienced adverse childhood events (ACEs) that include interpersonal trauma, such as neglect, or physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual abuse.

This trauma is referred to as interpersonal because it betrays the trust of the interpersonal connection—the trust that is the bedrock of all human relationships. Unfortunately, the acts that make up an ACE are most likely to be carried out by a trusted adult in a caretaking role: a parent, a step-parent, or another primary caregiver.

The injuries that result from such traumas are profound and long-lasting. These injuries typically happen repeatedly over many years so that the affected individual's behavior and beliefs about themselves, other people, relationships, and the world become permanently shaped by these early life experiences. When these post-traumatic beliefs are left unexamined and unchecked, they can wreak havoc on a person's life—robbing them of peace, joy, contentment, and health.

One example of a common post-traumatic injury is the pervasive and enduring belief that “*I, the victim of trauma, am not enough . . .*”—not attractive enough, not fit enough, not a good enough parent, not a good enough spouse or friend or employee or colleague, not smart enough, not rich enough, not cultured enough, not responsible enough, not professional enough.

The shame that is at the heart of this belief is ever-present, and affects decision-making on a daily basis. Yet, the shame is, at its core, the fear that we are unlovable, unworthy of care and inclusion—and it is so



powerfully disturbing to us that our brains keep this feeling and these thoughts out of consciousness, unrecognized and unnamed.

This unspeakability factor can fuel treatment-resistant depression and anxiety, compulsive tendencies (overworking, overeating, over-exercising, drinking too much, using drugs, gambling to an unhealthy degree, engaging in codependent relationships, angry outbursts, hurtful behavior), and can influence our decision to consciously or unconsciously override what we want or need to pursue short-term goals that will make us feel more worthy of acceptance.

The result is that we are always chasing a goal that we hope will bring us peace or joy, and yet, try as we might, we cannot seem to overcome our pervasive sense of inferiority—even when we reach our goals! We then decide, often without appreciating our success and accomplishments, that it must be the next goal that will bring us contentment—since we do not feel worthy of this goal we just reached. And so the cycle continues.

## THE CYCLE CAN BE BROKEN

Beliefs about ourselves and others that are born out of adverse childhood events can be re-examined and reformulated in adulthood. If anxiety, depression, compulsion, anger, and frustration are haunting us, it can bring relief to look at our beliefs about ourselves, the world, and others in it.

In examining our beliefs in the light of compassion and unconditional positivity, we can decide whether those trauma-born beliefs are accurate and, if so, whether they are serving us well in adulthood. With the help of a good guide, we can liberate ourselves from our fear that we are not good enough, and find our way to joy, peace, contentment, and health. Otherwise, our original trauma can erode the majority of joy and contentment in life until life runs out. ❦

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