Navigating Uncertainty: Diagnostic Challenges in Youth Affected by Trauma

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As psychologists in a community mental health setting, we often see children who have experienced trauma (e.g., abuse, neglect, domestic violence). Trauma-affected children show a range of behavioral and emotional difficulties that are not always adequately described by DSM-5 diagnostic categories. They may be impulsive, aggressive, withdrawn, or tearful and have difficulties concentrating, learning, building relationships, or communicating with others. It is often challenging to differentiate the effects of trauma from other psychological conditions such as ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, or autism. This challenge is compounded by the limitations of the DSM-5 in capturing the symptoms seen in children with complex and chronic trauma. When children are assigned diagnoses without sufficient attention to their trauma history, they may miss out on receiving appropriate trauma-informed interventions. In addition, careful assessment of the role of trauma in a child's functioning allows providers to better educate parents and teachers about the effects of trauma, appropriate expectations, and effective support strategies.

In this workshop, we will address the importance of routine screening for trauma and how to screen effectively in different settings. Attendees will become more aware of the various ways that traumatic exposure can impact children's functioning and common diagnostic patterns seen in children exposed to trauma. This workshop will also address challenges of using the DSM-5 to describe the functioning of children with traumatic life experiences. Attendees will learn specific strategies for more in-depth assessment of trauma exposure and symptoms and when it is appropriate to refer trauma-exposed children for psychological assessment. This workshop will present strategies for (1) differentiating trauma-related behaviors from other diagnoses and (2) determining when it is or is not appropriate to assign non-trauma-related diagnoses (e.g., ADHD, learning disorder) in children exposed to trauma. Our presentation will benefit a variety of mental health and medical providers who work with children, adolescents, and families including, but not limited to, psychologists, clinical social workers, counselors, pediatricians, psychiatrists, and nurse practitioners.