

3 Ways Unresolved Trauma Can Derail Your Relationships

Most of us aren't in the market of getting into a relationship, only to push our partner away. We probably aren't in the habit of saying we want to feel a deep connection with others, while doing everything that preaches a different story.

And, most of us usually insist that we're fine, that our childhood was normal, our home-life is satisfying, and everything is status quo, including our relationships. The fact is, by the time we're adults, many of us have brushed off, pushed away and shoved down earlier pain so often, that our reactions to these experiences have become conditioned as 'normal'.

Welcome to survival mode...

We minimize. We deny. We rationalize. We put on a smile and go about our day, none the wiser, and all the more numb.

We've learned to compartmentalize phrases like "unresolved trauma" as synonymous to someone who's been therapized. And, by separating ourselves from words like "shame", "rage", or "pain" we momentarily feel invincible.

Until the depression or anxiety hits, and then it's back to that toxic loop to push it away.

The effects of trauma seep into other area of our lives—from how we feel about ourselves, to fears of abandonment or engulfment, to our attachment style, or how our personality traits influence our behavior and habits.

Unresolved trauma is one of the biggest predictors of relationship strife, where getting involved with emotionally unavailable partners, or finding ways to emotionally numb ourselves becomes just another day in our lives.

Another go-to behavior in our emotionally numbing arsenal. Another repeat of that familiar song and dance.

We may buy the latest self-help books, attend weekly couples therapy, or invest in “how to” courses to increase our active listening while decreasing our impulsivity.

And, while we may feel good—even amazing—for awhile, that shit cycle always rears its head.

It may not kick up exactly the same way each time. Today it may show up as agitation or frustration where the things you once claimed to love about your S.O. are now causing an argument. Or, it may show up next week where you emotionally shut down, push away your S.O., and tune them out while hoping they do the same.

Until they do tune you out....and it kicks up another round in the push-pull.

A bitter pill to accept about unresolved trauma is that both partners are affected. And, if focusing on the cyclic dynamics of narcissistic relationships, both partners are often drawn to each other as a way to distract themselves from their own pain by focusing on the other person's.

Defining Trauma

Trauma is typically defined as an individual's behavior and feelings resulting from a traumatic event, or a series of events that threatened a sense of safety and that person's ability to cope. What is interpreted as a traumatic event for one person, may not affect another. Equally important is deciphering between things like resiliency, versus living in *denial* or turning to self-sabotaging habits to numb as these are huge in assessing for PTSD.

Trauma Red Flags Include:

- The event happened within the last 3–6 months
- Symptoms have lasted at least a month (and may last years) and have caused significant problems in functioning
- The event co-occurred or was in close succession to other traumatic events (ie. friends smearing you after a traumatic breakup, or job loss and car accident)
- History of repeated, chronic child abuse
- The current event retriggered past traumatic event(s)
- The event threatened or violated personal safety, belonging or trust (narcissistic abuse)

3 Ways Unresolved Trauma Is Hurting Your Relationships

Emotional Escalation.

We're all guilty of being short-tempered every now and then or snapping at our partner. Maybe we had a bad night sleeping or a long day at work. We're human. And it happens. However, emotional escalation takes on a life of its own when it's based on unresolved trauma.

For example, you may be unusually tense or agitated all, or most, of the time where your typical go-to reactions are to either lash out or shut down. Obviously, neither of these are a healthy way to react.

However, when unresolved trauma is along for the ride, better judgement is shown the door.

Stress pushes our nervous system past its ability to regulate. We may wind up staying stuck in our sympathetic nervous system—on fight, flight or freeze.

Symptoms of being “stuck” in your sympathetic nervous system include: tense muscles, headaches, anger, overthinking and hyperactivity—all of which keep you stuck in ready-to-react mode and unable to relax.

Compulsive/Addictive Behavior.

At the root of all compulsive or addictive behavior is trauma. Unresolved and unprocessed pain can feel so overwhelming for a person, that *any* behavior can be turned to, in order to emotionally numb.

Here is where self-sabotage often takes a front seat which can include: sexual addictions, infidelity, an inability to be alone, drug/alcohol addictions, gaming addictions, or even workaholism. When addictive behavior is keeping a person chained to the cycle of trauma, it's based on several things which include neurotransmitters and hormones such as dopamine, norepinephrine, oxytocin and cortisol, as well as the emotional rush (or numbing) from the addictive behavior. Dopamine, norepinephrine and oxytocin feel good—they mimic those warm-fuzzy feelings and reward center in our brain. For an adult who didn't receive love, attention or affection as a kid, this feel-good cocktail of neurotransmitters and hormones becomes addicting in itself.

For example, if depression or anxiety spike, so may a pornography addiction or gaming addiction as a way of fleeing the pain or drama and to emotionally numb. Each time those neurotransmitters or hormones are triggered, so is the addictive rush.

Emotional Disconnection.

This is often referred to as “neck, up”—all analytical, with little to no emotion. This type of trauma response is often longstanding where a kid may have been shamed or went unheard, so as an adult they’re silencing themselves and shutting down, while emotionally disconnecting from their partner.

Emotional disconnection is the flipside of emotional escalation. Whereas escalation is based on hyper-reactivity, disconnection is based on hypo-reactivity.

If one partner isn’t emotionally present, communication ceases. This situation is often synonymous with Avoidant attachment, where things need to remain superficial and fun, or unresolved trauma can be triggered.

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