

COMPLEX PTSD IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Understanding complex trauma in children and adolescents

Some children and teenagers experience repeated violence, such as family violence, sexual assault, incest, war, migration, harassment, sexual exploitation and that endured as witnesses of domestic violence. This violence is not just physical or sexual, it can also be psychological (insults, humiliation, belittlement, indifference, etc.) and can accumulate.

The experience of trauma is not an isolated incident, but is rather multiple, chronic and prolonged in nature. Trauma then becomes chronic and impacts the child's psychological and neurobiological development. The consequences of growing up in a daily atmosphere of violence, tension and pressure are very negative for a child's development. These consequences are all the more severe for children up to the age of 11-12 years. Infants who are not yet able to express their feelings in words are particularly vulnerable.

In addition to the wounds caused by trauma, the child is confronted with the prospect of repeated violence and their powerlessness against it. To adapt and survive, they develop mechanisms such as denial (what's happening to me isn't happening to me, the aggressor wants what's best for me), splitting (I pretend nothing has happened), emotional numbing (I feel nothing), dissociation (I'm not here, I'm not in my body) and so on. These mechanisms have a powerful impact on a child's development.

In general, most parents are able to help and support their child through a traumatic event. They help them recover a sense of safety and control. The affection and support of close ones are like a shield that does not totally prevent the shock and violence of trauma but mitigates the intensity.

However, 80% of violence occurs within the family. The aggressors are often people who the children and teenagers trusted and who should have protected them, for instance, a parent, a relative or an authority figure such as a cleric or a teacher.

In such situations, unlike adults, children cannot report abuse or escape because their survival depends on those close to them or is intertwined with the circumstances in which they live (this is the case, for example, with unaccompanied minors who migrate).

When trauma occurs within the home, the child is faced with a conflict of loyalties and implements strategies to survive within the family. They try to adapt to the family's implicit rules, such as respecting the silence imposed regarding what they are experiencing or observing. The child does what they can to keep the secret, manage their powerlessness and adapt as best they can to survive despite a daily life of violence and trauma.

The trauma defines their development, their relationships with others and with themselves. Children who suffer from a traumatic disorder are often more aggressive and fearful than other children. They develop a vision of the world marked by betrayal and hurt. They anticipate and expect the trauma to be repeated.

They respond by being hyperactive or, on the contrary, by withdrawing. They organise their relationships with others according to their expectation of aggression or abandonment or to prevent them. Each re-exposure to aspects of the trauma triggers it. This can be a sound, a noise, a smell, etc. The trauma even shapes the child's self-concept, which is generally very negative.

If left unattended, the consequences are serious for the child's health and for their future as an adult. Not only do they have an impact on their psychological health, but also on their physical health. It is important to get help as soon as possible. Having a better life and flourishing are possible despite a childhood and/or adolescence marked by trauma.

➤ Warning signs

- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Insecure attachment
- Regression and emotional lability
- Aggression towards self and others
- Behavioural, attention and learning difficulties
- Sleep and eating disorders
- Somatic complaints (stomach ache, headache, eczema, etc.)
- Always feeling out of place
- Guilt, self-hatred, lack of self-confidence
- Risk-taking behaviours
- Difficulties setting limits