

# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Anyone working in the field of addiction quickly realizes that trauma is an issue that must be addressed in recovery. Research demonstrates that the experience of early childhood trauma pre-wires the brain for addiction. Furthermore, it is impossible to live as an addicted person without experiencing even more trauma. Whether an individual is addicted to alcohol, other drugs, sex, codependency or any other addictive/compulsive behavior, life will be increasingly painful. Because trauma and addiction are so interrelated it is important to understand trauma.

## WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is any event or experience that overwhelms an individual's emotional and relational capacity to process the experience. *Relational capacity* refers to our ability to continue interacting with God and others under increasingly difficult circumstances. *Emotional capacity* refers to our ability to process the emotions we feel under increasingly difficult circumstances. An event or experience becomes traumatic when it overwhelms our brains' relational and emotional circuitry.

When that circuitry is overwhelmed, our brains lose the ability to interact with God and others in ways that are life-giving. When we are emotionally overwhelmed, negative feelings become so strong that they diminish our sense of self and "who I am". When our emotional and relational circuits are overwhelmed our brains becomes preoccupied with survival and tends to hide, fight, or freeze.

## TYPES OF TRAUMA

There are two types of trauma. Trauma *Type A* refers to the absence of the good and necessary things needed to grow a healthy, stable identity. Type A traumas are the things that keep us from growing strong emotional and relational capacity. Type A traumas include things like: neglect, malnutrition, sickness/disease, lack of affection, etc. People who experience significant Type A trauma find themselves more easily overwhelmed by the demands and challenges of everyday life. Because the experience of Trauma A causes our relational and emotional circuitry to be underdeveloped, we are more likely to be easily overwhelmed. We may have a hard time developing strong, deep connections with God and with others.

Trauma *Type B* refers to the bad things that happen that overwhelm our emotional and relational capacity. The experiences of Type B traumas cause our emotional and relational circuitry to shut down.

Our brain enters “survival mode” and is primarily interested in trying to help us stay alive. Type B trauma includes the kinds of things that we usually think about as being traumatic. These include things like: abuse (verbal, emotional, physical or sexual), violence, or the experience of catastrophic natural disaster. People who have experienced Type A trauma experience more trauma Type B. Their nervous system is not developed with the ability to handle high degrees of intensity. As a result, events that would not be distressing to other people, feel intensely overwhelming to those with Type A trauma. Unfortunately, those of us with addictions have experienced both.

## **A DISTRESSED BRAIN**

The brain does not like being relationally and emotionally overwhelmed. It experiences profound distress when it is unable to internally regulate problems and negative life experiences. An overwhelmed brain that cannot regulate distress (internally) automatically starts looking for a source of relief, externally. The cravings for relief are powerful, baffling, and cunning. A traumatized brain will look for relief in the form of anything that brings temporary pleasure and numbs pain. Once the brain discovers that a particular substance or behavior brings pleasure and relief, it will return to it again every time it is distressed. This sets up a powerful and vicious cycle of pain, relief, trauma, and addiction.

## **IN RECOVERY**

Although trauma is a part of the addictive cycle, it is not something to be addressed in early treatment. Depending on the type of addiction or substances abused, it may take weeks or months until acute withdrawal is complete. It may take even longer for the brain to normalize. Until thinking is clear, the brain simply will not process trauma. In long term residential treatment, it's a good idea to wait at least six months before asking recovery persons to begin working on trauma.

## **TRAUMA RECOVERY STARTS WITH CAPACITY**

In order to process trauma, the brain must grow the emotional and relational capacity needed to handle the level of distress experienced during the trauma.

## *RELATIONAL CAPACITY*

We begin to grow relational capacity by learning to develop ever deepening connections with God and others. To process trauma successfully, the brain needs to be able to stay interactively connected with God and/or others while resolving painful events. Those connections must exceed the intensity of the trauma. If the intensity of the trauma exceeds the strength of our connections with God and others, our brains will not allow the memory of our traumatic experience to load into conscious memory long enough to resolve it. This is why trauma recovery begins with building solid and ongoing joyful connections with God and others.

One of the most disturbing aspects of trauma is our subjective feeling of being absolutely alone. When our brains' relational circuits shut down in response to trauma we lose our awareness of the presence of God and other people who could help us. Subjectively, we feel alone. The last thing we want to do in trauma recovery is ask someone to process an experience in which they felt completely alone – until they have grown strong connections with God and others that exceed the intensity of the trauma. This is why growing relational capacity is foundational for trauma recovery. In traumatic experiences we have no sense of relational connection with anyone. In recovery we need strong relational connections that allow memories of pain and being alone to rise to the surface.

## *EMOTIONAL CAPACITY*

In the same way, our ability to experience and recover from negative emotions must be strong. Growing emotional capacity takes time. In recovery, we must learn to experience basic emotions like anger, or fear, or shame, without relapse. We need to be able to feel and experience those emotions without being damaged by them or damaging others. We need to be able to feel our emotions without having our behavior determined by what we feel. We want to learn how to feel angry, sad, ashamed or fearful and still act from our true identity in Christ. When resolving traumatic experiences, the level of emotional intensity is high. We cannot expect to handle the intensity of traumatic memories if we have not yet learned how to process the kinds of emotions we experience in normal daily living.

## **CHRIST-CENTRED TRAUMA RECOVERY**

The word Immanuel means, “God is with us”. It is Jesus’ name. This means that Jesus is with us always. There is never a moment that He is absent. Growing an awareness of Jesus’ presence with us daily is

an essential aspect of discipleship and recovery. We want to learn to talk with Jesus about all of our experiences. We want to see people, places, situations, and ourselves the way He does. Everything changes when we learn to interact with Jesus and see things like He does.

'Immanuel' is an important aspect of trauma recovery. Because Jesus is always with us, He knows about our trauma even though we were not aware of His presence. He was there, even if we were too distracted or upset to perceive His presence. He is there before we know even know Him.

Learning to ask Jesus for His perspective about traumatic experiences can be profoundly healing. When we see ourselves from His point of view everything can change. Seeing those who hurt us from Jesus' perspective can set us free to see and respond to them like He does. Jesus loves to restore us from the devastation of trauma. Learning to connect with Immanuel is a core component of Christ-centered trauma recovery.

*This information sheet was written by Ed Khouri, Equipping Hearts for the Harvest, ISAAC Secretariat*

## **RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:**

[www.joystartshere.com](http://www.joystartshere.com)

- The Life Model: Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You
- Joy Starts Here
- Restarting
- Belonging
- Joyful Journey
- Share Immanuel

[www.kclehman.com](http://www.kclehman.com)

- Outsmarting Yourself

[www.equippinghearts.com](http://www.equippinghearts.com)

- Ed and Maritza Khouri (www.equippinghearts.com) frequently address addiction, trauma, and trauma recovery at conferences and workshops.

The Body Keeps Score by Bessel Van der Kolk