

Trauma Chat Episode 7

Disclaimer: This is a verbatim transcript which may contain spelling errors.

[00:00:00] **Laura Reagan:** [00:00:00] Trauma Chat episode 7.

[00:00:03] Hi, welcome back. So today we're going to talk about complex PTSD. In episode number five, I gave you the definition of PTSD from the diagnostic criteria of the DSM five. The problem with that diagnostic criteria is that it is more built around, well, if you read the book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, which I mentioned in a previous episode and I'll link to in today's show notes, Bessel van der Kolk, who is the author of that book and a psychiatrist who used to work at the VA and was instrumental in developing the PTSD diagnosis in response to veterans returning from the Vietnam war, and having symptoms that [00:01:00] had not been accurately described in the mental health world, they came up with the PTSD diagnosis. And since then, it's become clear that the diagnosis was focused on veterans and war experiences, which is why it said that it had to be life-threatening or threatening serious injury or death.

[00:01:24] Whereas this is one of the things I mentioned earlier in the show that people with trauma often say, well, you know, it wasn't, life-threatening what I went through. But being hit as a child by your parent is not going to kill you most of the time, of course children can be physically abused to the point of death, but being slapped in the face by your mom, when you're five, isn't going to kill you. But it is a deep wound, emotionally. [00:02:00] It's an attachment wound because you depend on your mom for survival when you're a child. And if your mom will hurt you, then the person that you depend on for survival is also someone who hurts you. The brain doesn't know how to make sense of that because the brain wants to know, is this a threat or is this safe?

[00:02:23] And to move through our attachment development process, we need to feel safe. We need to have caregivers that are safe and so there is a survival threat when children are harmed by their parents, even if a parent is emotionally abusive, um, and tells the child "You're worthless. I hate you. I wish you were never born." Those are words. They won't kill someone, but to hear your parents say that they feel that [00:03:00] way about you, does feel like a survival threat when you're a small child and you depend on your parents for safety. And what tends to happen when we have those types of events is that the child says, "okay, my parent doesn't love me. I'm bad, I'm flawed. I shouldn't exist."

[00:03:24] And then that person may struggle with suicidal thoughts and feelings throughout the rest of their life. Now when a parent says those things and it harms the child, but then there's a repair where the parent says, I said something to you that I didn't mean, it was wrong for me to use those unkind words about you, I love you, I don't feel the way I said I'm so sorry for saying that to you. And then gives the child a [00:04:00] chance to talk about how they felt when they heard those words and to ask questions, then the child is giving the, the parent is giving the child a signal that they are safe. And if, if that kind of behavior doesn't continue, it's not a pattern of behavior where the parent is repeatedly, emotionally abusive and then apologetic, and then emotionally abusive, and then apologetic.

[00:04:26] If it's a cycle like that, it's going to be traumatic for the child. But if it's, if there's a repair, there's more opportunity for the child to develop a felt sense of safety with that parent again. So, I'm using the example of emotional abuse, most people would not think of emotional abuse as being life-threatening, but it is deeply wounding to a child or a partner in a [00:05:00] love relationship whose whose partner says that to them. It's deeply wounding, it's deeply painful. And so that can be a traumatic experience. It's it's very common. In fact, I'm sure many of you have heard people say that, you know, the old, um, chant on the playground is sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

[00:05:25] And in contrast, people say, actually words are more painful than broken bones. So, that's the problem with the PTSD diagnosis in the DSM, one of them is that it doesn't capture the full range of experiences that people can have that can be traumatic. So it leaves people thinking that's not their situation and then they think, "there just must be something wrong with me. There must be something wrong with me," instead of realizing that this is an effect of trauma and [00:06:00] attachment wounds.

[00:06:01] So I mentioned in episode five, the International Classification of Diseases, which is the diagnostic criteria that's used by most of the rest of the world, aside from the U.S in diagnosing mental health disorders and physical health disorders, has created a diagnosis that we don't have in the DSM that we use in the U.S Complex PTSD. So Complex PTSD differs from PTSD as it is described in the DSM, in that it has the same symptoms as the DSM, but it adds in some other symptoms and they are: difficulty with emotional regulation, meaning that the person is not [00:07:00] able to manage their emotions, being, being emotionally regulated is being able to have your feelings and still think at the same time being within your window of tolerance, which I'll talk about in episode 10, being emotionally regulated. Well, let me describe what being emotionally dysregulated is being emotionally dysregulated is when you get upset and you're yelling, and screaming, and throwing things, and punching, your reaction is far out of the ordinary and much bigger in proportion to the situation that's happening. And I used the example before of road rage. So when we become enraged and we're screaming because there's traffic slowing down in front of us or the person in front of us isn't going as fast as we want them to. [00:08:00] And we're veering around them and we're tailgating them and we're yelling and screaming, waving a gun, or we even jumped out of the car and go up and threaten them, that's being emotionally dysregulated. It can also be, crying at inopportune times. Now, we all experience a range of emotions throughout every day.

[00:08:23] And to begin crying at any given point is, can be healthy and normal. But if you don't want to be crying and you can't control it, and there's nothing happening in the current moment, that is sad or upsetting, but the tears are coming out anyway, I would call that being dysregulated. Okay, so emotional regulation difficulty was the first one.

[00:08:49] And in addition to that, changes in consciousness. So that's basically they're giving bigger emphasis to dissociation than just the PTSD [00:09:00] diagnosis with dissociative features as we have in the DSM and the changes in consciousness, they called detachment or dissociation, also memory issues, trouble with attention, that type of thing, and negative self perception. So again, that's low self-worth, feeling that no one cares about you, I'm a

horrible person, even though your friends tell you, no, you're not, you're wonderful. And you just can't shake this persistent feeling that you are horrible. Everyone hates you. No one likes you. When really you're surrounded by friends. One example of this could be when you suspect that if people knew the real you, everyone would hate you or no one would like you. Sure, they like me, but if they really knew me, they would see what a horrible person I am, relationship difficulties. So [00:10:00] that could be what I just mentioned, but also unhealthy relationship patterns are, are a feature of complex PTSD. Distorted perception of the abuser. So, one example of this is it's very common for people who let's say one parent was a physically abusive alcoholic, and the other parent was critical, controlling, judgmental, called names, but they weren't physically abusive. What we will often see is this view that the alcoholic parent is the horrible monster, and the other parent who was not an alcoholic is a saintly angel. Of course, no one is [00:11:00] either a monster or an angel. We're all complex people and we, we can be nice, and we can be mean, we can be happy, we can be sad, we can be kind, and we can be aggressive. So having this perception that the abusive parent, the alcoholic abusive parent was a monster, seeing them as like larger than life, someone who you know, is unable to be vanquished. It's like in a movie where there's a bad guy, character, and no matter what they can't, they can't be killed.

[00:11:39] That's not real. Everyone is just a person, even though some people do horrible things, they're not larger than life. And the other parent who is the saintly angel, that's a distorted perception as well. So, I see it very commonly that people [00:12:00] will come into therapy with all of the symptoms of trauma, but no memory of anything traumatic happening during their childhood or adult years.

[00:12:12] And then they will describe their parents as being perfect, and their childhood was perfect, and everything was perfect, and everybody was so happy, and the family was so loving, and it was all just really perfect. And that's just not realistic because even in families where there's no abuse and everyone's kind to each other most of the time, and there's plenty of love, and plenty of resources to go around, it's still normal for families to have conflicts, to get mad at each other at times, to do things that hurt one another unintentionally or intentionally, and have to recover from those things. So if a person is saying that their, their family and their childhood are perfect, that's, that's a distortion [00:13:00] because nobody has a perfect life. And the last one that goes along with complex PTSD is on top of all those other symptoms that I've already mentioned, a sense of loss of meaning and purpose.

[00:13:14] So we'll often hear people say, "what's the point? Why, why should I even try? You know, there's no, there's nothing for me. Things aren't ever going to get better. I want to believe that I could feel better, but I know it's hopeless. I don't even know why I'm going to therapy." And in that also can be a loss of a sense of spiritual connection, or connection within yourself.

[00:13:45] When I say spiritual connection, um, I mean, a sense of being a part of something greater, like, you know, the human family, or your religious beliefs, [00:14:00] the God you believe in, or planet earth, mother nature, being a part of our world. Trauma can take that feeling away, and I want to be clear that all of these symptoms can get better.

[00:14:20] You can heal from trauma. And that's why I made this show is to explain basic information about trauma and let you know that, if you're feeling these feelings, this may mean that you have been affected by trauma in some way that you may not even realize. I'm a trauma therapist myself, and I knew I had certain traumatic experiences in my history that impacted me, but there were some other experiences I had that I knew I had them, it wasn't like I didn't remember them, but I had no connection to the traumatic impact that they had on me. And [00:15:00] then under the surface, there they are, affecting me in my life in these repeating patterns that I can look back over decades and say, hmm, that repeated here, and again, here and again, here and again here, the only thing that was different was this, but besides that it was all the same.

[00:15:22] So, it can really sneak up on you. And that's why I felt like it was so important to make a podcast that's about the basics of trauma. And I hope that learning about complex PTSD today in this brief little discussion has been helpful for you. If you think you might have complex PTSD, I will put some resources in today's show notes.

[00:15:49] One I mentioned last time is The Trauma Toolkit Book by Susan Pease Banitt, which actually gives you a lot of [00:16:00] information about trauma responses and how to cope with them in the moment. For example, if you're having a flashback, she has things you can do that can help you come out of the flashback.

[00:16:13] And another resource that I'd like to mention is Lisa Ferentz's workbook called Letting Go of Self-Destructive Behaviors, A Workbook of Hope and Healing. Relational trauma, which is trauma that comes from something one human does to another human is most effectively healed within a therapeutic relationship, or some other type of trusting, supportive, and nonjudgmental, relationship.

[00:16:44] But there are workbooks and books that you can use to compliment your therapy or to help you get prepared for starting therapy. I hope this has been helpful for you as always, [00:17:00] I appreciate you going to iTunes and leaving a rating and review if you like the show so that apple will let other people find it.

[00:17:09] And I'm grateful to you for listening to Trauma Chat. Next time, I'm going to talk about attachment. So, talk to you soon!