

Treatment of Trauma Inflicted by Emotional Abuse

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Abstract

The traumatic experiences of victims of physical and sexual abuse within families have been studied in depth. However, the trauma of emotional abuse within families has received little attention in the literature.

Keywords: Trauma; Sexual abuse; Emotional abuse; Child vulnerable; Maltreatment

Short Communication

Because emotional abuse often lacks physical characteristics, it is frequently misunderstood, misdiagnosed, and unrecognized. Emotional abuse has rarely been clearly or concretely defined [1-6]. One definition of emotional abuse is: "Acts of omission and commission which are judged on the basis of a combination of community standards and professional expertise to be psychologically damaging. Such acts are committed by parent figures in a position of differential power that renders the child vulnerable. Such acts damage immediately or ultimately the behavioral, cognitive, affective, social and psychological functioning of the child" [7].

Despite being an elusive and often hard to describe entity, the scope of emotional abuse can be wide. Close to 686,000 juveniles were referred to their local child protective service (CPS) offices for child abuse or neglect in the United States in 2014. Of those close to 700,000 juveniles, it is estimated 11%, or approximately 75,500, were referred solely for emotional abuse [8]. Despite these numbers, there appears to be less recognition of emotional abuse or maltreatment as a significant problem and as stated earlier, research into the effects of emotional abuse lags behind research of child physical or sexual abuse.

There are a number of trauma focused evidence based therapeutic modalities for treating family perpetrated emotional abuse. It is of the utmost importance for the practitioner to address traumatic reactions by creating a sense of safety and trust for the victim in session. Additionally, it is important for the practitioner to allow the client to enhance the brain's executive functioning, and to reframe and integrate the traumatic experiences, so that the victim can create a more congruent sense of self and well-being.

Emotional abuse may be addressed by a number of therapeutic interventions such as psychodynamic therapy, cognitive based trauma focused therapy (TF-CBT) [9]. Integrative treatment of complex trauma (ITCT) [10], expressive arts therapy [11], play therapy for children, narrative therapy, and exposure therapy. These modes of treatment have an empirical basis, and there are a number of trainings, guides, workbooks and educations regarding their use and application.

Trauma treatment is more effective and efficacious when it is addressed as early as possible with a victim. While the juvenile or child

victim of emotional trauma, especially within a violent family environment, may not feel safe or free, or be able to discuss traumatic material, it is essential that the client feel as safe, physically and emotionally, as possible within the treatment setting. This safe feeling enables the client to regulate emotionally, which will enhance the process to incorporate the trauma within their own narrative. Owning their narrative, combined with a safe, warm, and genuine therapeutic environment can allow the victim of emotional abuse to start addressing the trauma inflicted within an unstable family.

While this trauma can be treated effectively through such supportive interventions as mentioned above, it is also essential for the practitioner to remember, and be guided by the fact, that the trauma inflicted by emotional abuse is best processed when the victim controls the speed in which the narrative of the trauma is verbalized. However, if the clinician pushes for the victim to quickly work on their trauma narrative, triggering, and an unsafe and untrusting therapeutic alliance will develop. If the practitioner drags out treatment, and does not provide a supportive impetus for the client to address the trauma, the victim may never fully synthesize the benefits of treatment. In both situations, the victim of the trauma of emotional abuse may continue living a traumatized and unproductive life. The clinicians' goal should be to provide safety, balance and support throughout the therapeutic journey.

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