

WHAT IS TRAUMA? ^[1]

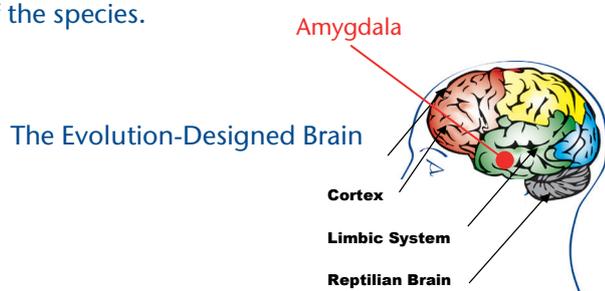
Trauma is an experience that overwhelms a person's ability to cope. This might be because:

- ❖ it is so awful
- ❖ it happens at a young age before ways of coping are learned
- ❖ it happens over and over again
- ❖ it happens at the same time as other stressful life events (a new job or a new baby for example)
- ❖ it reminds the person of bad experiences in their past

To understand why a person's ability to cope is undermined after a trauma it is important to first understand how the brain works.

THE OLD BRAIN AND THE NEW BRAIN ^[1,2]

The human brain consists of 3 distinct parts that all evolved at different times in the evolutionary history of the species.



The Reptilian Brain

The reptilian brain is the oldest part of the human brain. The main task of the reptilian brain is to maintain survival and therefore controls basic and vital bodily functions such as breathing, balance and temperature. This part of the brain works sub-consciously and instinctually.

The Limbic System

The limbic system developed with the first mammals. Like the reptilian brain, it is concerned with survival and operates sub-consciously. The limbic system controls the expression of emotions, the body's response to danger and the processing of short term memory.

The Cortex

The cortex is the newest part of the human brain and gives humans the ability to engage in higher levels of thinking. This includes the ability to analyse, use logic, imagine and plan. This newer, sophisticated part of the brain involves more conscious processes and so is slower than the more instinctual parts of the brain.

Threat and Danger ^[2]

Despite the sophisticated evolution of the human brain, its primary function remains self-preservation. This means that in times of threat and danger the older and survival-focussed parts of the brain will always over-ride the more logical and intellectual parts.

A key part of the limbic system for understanding the brain's response to threat and danger is the **amygdala** (see brain diagram).

The amygdala processes information from the senses and it asks one simple question – “is this safe?” The amygdala does not wait for a more reasoned response from the more sophisticated cortex. It is designed to keep the person alive so if the amygdala perceives a threat it immediately sets off the brain's alarm system – often called the **“fight or flight” response**. This activates the autonomic nervous system, preparing the body for action by increasing heart rate, respiration, blood oxygen levels and blood flow to muscles and deactivates all non-crucial bodily systems. This is known as **arousal**.

However, if trauma is on-going, such as through childhood abuse or domestic abuse, this alarm system can become “jammed” and the amygdala can become hyper-vigilant to any sign of threat and danger. This leaves the person in an almost constant state of arousal.

TRAUMA AND MEMORIES^[2]

During a traumatic event, the fight, flight or freeze response stops memory being recorded properly. This means that events may not get logged in an accurate time frame, and when recalled can be in a jumbled order and can be missing information.

Traumatic memories may be filed away by the limbic system in order that they can be easily and quickly accessed by the amygdala to recognise future dangers. This is because the limbic system has to keep the person alive and has no time to communicate with the logical cortex. Therefore when danger is perceived which can be innocent (such as red-haired man, loud noise) this can send the person into full scale alert triggering anxiety or flashbacks.

THE IMPACT ON THE SURVIVOR

While these brain responses make evolutionary sense and in times of danger will certainly help to keep the person alive, they can cause havoc to a person's life when they are not in actual danger.

The result of the on-going activation of the alert system means the survivor

- ❖ may constantly feel on edge
- ❖ may perceive danger even in non-threatening situations
- ❖ may have difficulty regulating their emotions
- ❖ may find it difficult to think clearly because the logical part of the brain is often "switched off"
- ❖ may have problems with short term memory

Information sourced and adapted from
1. EVA Services self help guide – Understanding Anxiety
2. Karunacounseling.wordpress.com

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WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Women who have experienced abuse and trauma will often come into contact with many professionals following the traumatic experience. There are some issues that professionals can be mindful of when supporting people who have experienced abuse and trauma.

- ❖ Traumatic memory works in a different way to non-traumatic memory, making it difficult to remember the what, when, where and why of experiences. Feeling pressured to provide this information can lead to not only inaccurate recollections but to the person being re-traumatised.
- ❖ Traumatic memory is rich in detail about the person's sensory experience. They will remember what they smelled, what they touched, how they felt and what they were thinking. Asking the person about their experience of the event is likely to provide much more information.
- ❖ While a person's alert system is activated their planning, organising and logic are deactivated. This means they may not be able to take in and process large amounts of information.

Professionals can help women to overcome these barriers by being mindful of their experiences and the effects the experiences may have on them. Some useful tips include:

- ❖ Acknowledge the trauma and the pain the woman has suffered
- ❖ If you need detail, ask about their experience of the event rather than the facts e.g. what were they thinking, their reaction to the event, what they remember seeing, feeling etc.
- ❖ Try to provide information in writing that can be referred back to (where this is safe to do so)
Provide written confirmation of appointments
- ❖ Be understanding if appointments are missed or information is forgotten
- ❖ Be understanding if a woman appears to over-react to a seemingly innocuous situation, as this might not actually be an over-reaction, but their brain simply ensuring their safety.