



Exploring the Connections Between Trauma and Health

Instead of “What’s wrong with me?”, ask “What’s happened to me?”

By Erin Beckwell, MSW RSW (Sask)

Living with violence or abuse at home. Surviving a car accident. Receiving a life-altering health diagnosis. Forced relocation due to disaster or war. If you have experiences like these in your past, they may be impacting your health today.

What is trauma?

There is no universal definition of trauma, and how each person (or community) responds to stressful life experiences is unique. One of the simplest ways to describe trauma is any experience which overwhelms a person’s capacity to cope. Trauma can result from any experience (single event, series of events, or set of circumstances) where our life or safety is threatened (or perceived to be). Trauma isn’t about what happened as much as it’s about what happens inside us as we attempt to make sense of, cope with, and move forward from these experiences – and that depends on things like our:

- Access to appropriate and compassionate supports
- Range of coping skills and strategies, and ability to use them effectively
- Presence of an empathetic and affirming witness (someone who acknowledges their experiences without minimizing, denying, or trying to ‘fix’ them)
- Age, state of development, previous trauma history, overall health, and other characteristics



Trauma disrupts our sense of safety, trust, and control. People who have experienced trauma will go to great lengths to re-establish these, as feeling unsafe and out of control is very distressing and takes a toll on our health.

How does trauma impact health?

No matter when trauma occurs, it can



impact our health. This information isn't new. Researchers, health care practitioners, traditional knowledge keepers, and people who've experienced trauma have long been saying that trauma can impact all aspects of a person's health, often in areas that are far-removed from the original experience.

People with unaddressed trauma often experience physical symptoms such as digestive issues, chronic pain, and conditions associated with increased inflammation due to chronic stress, such as cardiovascular disease and auto-immune conditions. Mental health is often affected – depression, anxiety, poor relationships with our bodies, food, and movement, substance use, and self-harm may be experienced. In relationships, people with trauma histories often struggle with trust, setting boundaries, safety, and feeling in control.

So, what can we do?

- Increasing our understanding of trauma, how common it can be, and how far-reaching its impact is can be a great place to start.

- Shifting the way we view ourselves and others can help, too. Sometimes the things we label as our greatest “flaws” are actually ways we've adapted to cope with the distressing and disruptive effects of trauma. Asking, “What happened to this

person?” rather than, “What's wrong with this person?” is a helpful way of reframing these coping strategies, even if they aren't always helpful or health-promoting. Acknowledging our creativity and resourcefulness in surviving trauma can move us away from shame and blame and help us feel in control and resilient.

- Reaching out to others when we need support, such as talking to a health care provider, seeing a counsellor, confiding in a trusted friend, or connecting with supportive communities online or in-person, can help us process trauma and explore new ways to cope with its effects.

- Finding activities and practices that support coping with stress and promote a sense of safe, mind-body connection, such as joyful movement, creative expression, participating in ceremony, or meditation can also be helpful.

Erin Beckwell, is a Social Worker with the Public Health Observatory – Population Health, Saskatchewan Health Authority. ❖