

Adapted from *Women: What do these signs have in common?* ↗

What is abuse-related trauma?

Abuse-related trauma can develop after a person has been hurt and/or neglected, usually in childhood. A woman may have been:

- sexually or physically abused
- emotionally abused or neglected.

As a result, the woman may have overwhelming feelings of distress, fear and helplessness.

Traumatic childhood events can change the way a person's brain and body work. Trauma can affect the person's emotions, memory, thinking and sense of self. Trauma can also affect relationships.

Women most often develop the effects of trauma if, as children, they felt helpless and trapped by abuse. Often the abuser was a family member or family friend.

One in five women has been sexually abused in childhood. One in two has been sexually assaulted or has experienced attempted sexual assault as an adult. Sexual abuse affects women from all backgrounds.

How do the effects of trauma develop?

Trauma is a normal response to being abused. Many children survive abuse by developing ways of coping that last into adulthood.

Children who are abused may not be able to understand that what is happening to them is wrong. Yet their bodies may register the danger and as adults their bodies still hold the memories of abuse.

As a result, many women who have been abused are easily triggered by things that remind them of the abuse. Their bodies may feel as if they are reliving the trauma, and they may have flashbacks (sudden, vivid and unpleasant memories of the event).

Women cope with painful feelings in different ways. For example, they may develop an eating disorder, misuse alcohol or other drugs, or harm themselves. These behaviours may help women cope for a while. But they often make women feel more isolated and depressed, and can increase anxiety and sleeping problems.

Trauma effects can make a woman feel out of control, or that she is "going crazy." She may feel either emotionally numb or suddenly alert and panicky. The woman may not realize that she is reacting to things that remind her of the abuse. Many people don't

know that abuse can affect their lives many years later, and do not connect the common effects of trauma to experiences of childhood abuse.

Recognizing abuse-related trauma

The signs described on the front of this brochure can be effects of trauma caused by abuse. Other common effects of trauma include:

- trouble sleeping
- having panic attacks and anxiety
- drinking or taking other drugs
- binge-eating, purging (throwing up) food or starving
- feeling like you don't want to live or you can't go on with your life
- repeated experiences of sexual or physical violence
- feelings of self-hate and low self-esteem
- fearing people and relationships.

Sometimes when a woman seeks help, the care provider may not link her reactions with abuse-related trauma. Women can be wrongly diagnosed and given unhelpful treatments, including some types of medicines. Often, the care provider sees the trauma effects (e.g., substance use, depression) as the problem, rather than as a result of trauma.

What makes a woman feel worse?

There are many situations that can make a woman's trauma worse.

Silencing

Some women may try to talk to friends or family members about the abuse. If a woman is told to "just forget it and get on with your life," she can feel isolated and silenced.

Abusive relationships

If a woman is in a relationship with someone who is emotionally, physically or sexually abusive, it worsens the effects of the original trauma. It also doesn't allow the woman the safety she needs for healing.

Discrimination

For many women, discrimination is an everyday experience. This causes stress, which is especially hard on a woman who is already traumatized. For women of colour and lesbians, racism and homophobia add to the lack of safety. Poverty often limits a woman's life choices (e.g., the ability to pay for therapy), adding to the problems.

Blame and shame

Without support and understanding, women may continue to feel guilty and ashamed. This can make them become isolated, feel depressed or harm themselves. Feelings of guilt and shame occur when the person:

- was blamed for the abuse
- was pressured to keep the abuse secret
- wrongly believed that she willingly joined in or “wanted” the abuse
- told others about her abuse and was not believed.

Trauma and relationships

Because trauma often results when a woman is hurt by another person, it can affect her trust in people:

- Some women grow up expecting that others will hurt them. As a result, they have trouble developing trust.
- Some women trust others too easily, and have difficulty judging who is safe. They learned in childhood that some family members they loved and trusted had also abused them. As a result, they learned to hand over their trust, even if the other person didn’t earn or deserve it.

Sexual abuse can affect women’s sexuality. A woman may confuse sex with love and care. This is because the abuser gave her attention and affection mainly through sexual contact. Experiences like this may also put a woman at more risk for unwanted or forced sex as an adult.

Some women have learned to avoid sex or intimacy, because these experiences may bring up negative feelings and memories connected with past abuse.

Strength and healing

If you have experienced childhood abuse, it can be overwhelming and upsetting to learn how it has affected your life. Remind yourself that you are a survivor. No matter how hard your life has been, you have found the strength to go on.

It is also important to respect the ways of coping that have allowed you to protect yourself, and to survive emotionally and physically. This same strength can be used in your work toward healing from abuse.

Healing starts with learning to identify and understand what has happened to you, and how it affects your life today. That way, you can find the kind of help you need to recover.

Why healing is important

Healing is important because it:

- allows women to feel more in control of their lives and entitled to their own thoughts and feelings

- allows women to develop closer relationships with others
- helps women to free themselves from the traumatic past; they no longer relive it in nightmares or in their daily lives whenever they feel afraid or powerless
- can help relieve pain and depression
- can help women experience their bodies and feelings again.

Seeking help is important

Women can and do recover from abuse-related trauma. In the first stages of trauma therapy, women learn more effective and less harmful ways to deal with the overwhelming pain they feel. Therapy also helps women cope with effects such as flashbacks, panic and self-harm.

When you look for help, make sure you are comfortable with a potential therapist's experience and approach. Ask him or her questions.

Where to find help

If you are concerned about abuse-related trauma, there are people who can help you or help you find support. Contact:

- women's health centres
- community health centres
- therapists in private practice (including psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers)
- sexual assault centres
- crisis lines for women who have been abused
- YWCA
- women's shelters
- spiritual centres
- family service agencies
- family doctors.