**[Childhood trauma](https://www.dawn.com/news/1831137/childhood-trauma)**

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SEVERAL people glorify different forms of abusive behaviour by parents to discipline children, despite the existence of non-abusive alternatives that work well. When asked about the long-term consequences of such abuse, they are unaware at best or dismissive at worst. Dismissive answers can be as simple as ‘we turned out fine’ or, in a nostalgic reflection, they can bring up the virtues of ‘old school’ parenting.

This begs the question: if despite experiencing emotional or physical abuse in childhood, many of the adults around us turned out to be ostensibly, functional, is there cause for concern? That is essentially the logic at the heart of ‘we turned out fine’.

The short answer to the question is that childhood trauma in the form of physical and emotional abuse can never be taken lightly and has important long-term consequences. This is precisely what a huge body of literature in psychology shows, making it important to dispel the commonly held belief that childhood trauma does not leave a mark.

In a fascinating book The Body Keeps the Score, Bessel van der Kolk discusses the long-term impact of different forms of trauma, including that experienced in childhood in detail. Let me give three simplified examples to explain some of the linkages between experiences in childhood and adult mental health.

The problem doesn’t go away by ignoring it.

First, children who grow up in households with emotionally unstable parents can develop anxiety disorders or hypervigilance. This is because they grew up in an environment where they had to constantly monitor the caregivers’ emotional state. The hypervigilance helps them survive in the household as kids, precisely because the adult is emotionally unstable. But it becomes a serious mental health issue in adulthood potentially in the form of anxiety disorders. Anyone who has lived with an anxiety disorder would attest to the immense difficulty it adds to daily life.

Second, children who experience physical and/ or sexual abuse, committed particularly by close family members, can end up with a host of issues related to intimacy in adulthood. This is because abuse at the hands of a trusted source confuses the child, making it very difficult for him/ her to trust people in intimate settings in adult life. Again, this lack of trust starts off as a coping mechanism in childhood that helps keep the child safe. But it becomes a mental health challenge in adult life with serious trust issues and relationship difficulties.

Third, more broadly, childhood abuse experienced at the hands of primary caregivers or others can significantly increase the likelihood of developing serious mental health disorders, such as depression, attention deficit, eating disorders, etc. The mental health consequences of such trauma experienced at the hand of parents are potentially more severe, because the child expects the parent to keep them physically and emotionally safe.

These are just three examples of the countless ways in which childhood trauma, perpetrated especially by the child’s caregivers, can lead to significant mental health challenges in adult life. In many cases, you can come across a perfectly functioning adult who looks fine on paper, but who may struggle with many issues such as depression, anxiety, or other mental health challenges beneath a calm surface. In other cases, these mental health challenges can become so significant that they impair daily functioning.

The one big challenge with mental health issues is that they often fly under the radar, making it easy to ignore them as a societal problem. You can’t quite see it in the same way as you see other forms of physical diseases. There also happens to be shame and taboo around discussing mental health issues. A combination of these factors makes it difficult to acknowledge these issues and their link with childhood trauma. But the problem doesn’t go away by ignoring it.

Of course, mental health challenges have many different contributors, including genetics and other environmental factors. The way we raise our kids also plays a huge role in changing the likelihood of children struggling with mental health disorders later in life. Physical and/ or emotional abuse from parents significantly adds to this likelihood.

Hence, it is important to change cavalier and dismissive attitudes towards childhood abuse in parenting. Once we take this first step, we can open the door to more conscious modes of parenting. While the ‘old school’ method of parenting might have many good features that we should retain in raising our future generations, a casual attitude towards physical and emotional abuse certainly shouldn’t be one of them.

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