

# Trauma and Addiction

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“One must not look hard to see that  
we are losing the battle against  
addiction”

Ed Khantzian, 2013  
Harvard Psychiatrist

# Outcomes are poor

Various studies have reported anywhere from 40% - 90% relapse rate in individuals with addictive disorders after completing treatment.

According to SAMHSA, only 47% of individuals successfully complete treatment.

# ACEs and Substance Abuse

**The higher the ACE score, the higher the chances of addiction to alcohol and other drugs in adulthood**

- 4 or more ACEs = 500% increase in risk for adult alcoholism**
- Men with 6 or more ACE's = 4600% increase in risk for IV drug use**
- 78% of IV drug use in women can be attributed to adverse childhood experiences**

# Traditional Addiction Treatment

- Focus on changing behaviors with less attention paid to what drives these behaviors
- Without an understanding of the impact of trauma, treatment strategies can re-traumatize a trauma survivor and trigger instinctive trauma responses
  - Fight, Flight, Freeze, Submit, Attach
- These trauma responses misinterpreted as resistance, denial, “not ready”, “non-compliant” etc
- Leads to clients leaving treatment or being asked to leave treatment

# Treatment Can Re-traumatize a trauma survivor

- **Absolute authority of the counselor**
- **Confrontation tactics**
- **Shaming practices**
- **Focus on 'character defects'**
- **"Addicts lie"**
- **Discharges for "non-compliance"**
- **Punishing aggression**
- **No choices**
- **Withholding medication-assisted treatment**
- **Told not to talk about trauma**

The background of the slide is a solid orange color with a pattern of darker orange leaf silhouettes scattered across it. The leaves vary in shape and size, some resembling maple leaves and others more like simple ovals.

Blaming  
Aggression  
Non-compliance  
High maintenance  
Superficial compliance  
Manipulation  
Dishonesty  
Relapse

# Traumatic reactions

**Fight**  
**Flight**  
**Freeze**  
**Submit**  
**Attach**

These reactions are instinctual protective strategies  
that happen when one feels unsafe

# Relational Trauma

- Early childhood trauma often occurs in the context of relationships that are meant to protect
- Children develop an internal working model that relationships are dangerous; this way of looking at the world continues into adolescence and adulthood
- Our current treatment models are relational
  - Group and individual treatment, 12 step community
  - This can be intensely triggering leading to client's acting in ways to protect themselves
    - Anger
    - Manipulation
    - Superficial compliance

# Rethinking addiction treatment

- Based on ACEs we can assume that many of our clients with addictions have experienced trauma and their addictive behaviors are primarily an adaptation to traumatic experiences
- It is important to assess for trauma and treat both the trauma and the substance use simultaneously
- Providers must avoid re-traumatization: If re-traumatization occurs in treatment, the individual may leave (or be asked to leave) the treatment program

# 12 Step Groups

- 12 Step program is a valuable community support and an adjunct to evidence based treatments
- This relationship-based self-help program of recovery can be both healing and triggering to a traumatized individual
- Unwillingness to participate may not be resistance or denial, but a common and expected reaction of someone who has experienced trauma in relationships
- Relationships are dangerous, and yet what is damaged in relationships can only be healed in relationships

Judith Herman

# The Limits of “Talk Therapy”

“We try to help people use insight and understanding to manage their behavior. However, neuroscience research shows us that very few psychological problems are the result of defects in understanding; most originate in pressures from deeper regions in the brain that drive our perception and attention. When the alarm bell of the emotional brain keeps signaling you are in danger, no amount of insight will silence it.”

van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, p. 64.

# Trauma is stored in the body

- All trauma is preverbal; the traumatized body re-experiences terror, rage and helplessness, but these feelings are almost impossible to articulate
- Survivors develop “cover stories” to explain their symptoms and behaviors; these stories rarely capture the inner truth of the experience
- The experience of trauma shows up in instinctual responses such as fight, flight, freeze, submit and attach
- Strategies involving breath, movement and touch are effective ways to help people understand and gain control over their instinctual responses

Vander kolk, 2014

# Adolescents and Opioid Use

- Between 1991 and 2012, the rate of “nonmedical use” (ie, use without a prescription or more than prescribed) of opioid medication by adolescents (12–17 years of age) and young adults (18–25 years of age) more than doubled, and the rate of opioid use disorders, including heroin addiction, increased as well.

Sharon Levy, MD, MPH, FAAP  
American Academy of Pediatrics

- Opioids are effective not only for physical pain, but for psychological pain as well
- Adolescent opioid use has been strongly linked to depression.
- Individuals who report taking prescription opioids for medical purposes during high school have a 33% greater risk of misusing opioids by the age of 23.

- Three medications are currently indicated for treating severe opioid use disorder: methadone, naltrexone, and buprenorphine.
  - Methadone has long been established as an effective treatment of opioid addiction, although federal regulations prohibit most methadone programs from admitting patients younger than 18 years.
  - Naltrexone (Vivitrol) has also proven to be an effective treatment of opioid addiction; Although there is not yet rigorous research support for efficacy in adolescents, growing experience and anecdotal reports support it as a promising practice

# Suboxone (Buprenorphine)

- In 2002, the US Food and Drug Administration approved the use of buprenorphine for patients 16 years and older
- Two randomized controlled trials have examined the therapeutic efficacy of buprenorphine combined with substance use counseling in adolescents and young adults
- Continued buprenorphine compliance is associated with an increase in treatment and can help adolescents achieve long-term sobriety.

# Stigma surrounding medication-assisted treatment

- Confusion, stigma, and limited resources severely restrict access to buprenorphine for both adolescents and adults.
- Despite the evidence to show that it is an effective treatment for substance use, the belief that it is merely substituting one substance for another is pervasive and leads to many people choosing not to use medicated assisted treatments for addiction.

# Parenting adolescents with trauma and substance use

- Affect Management
- Attunement
- Effective Response

Attachment, Regulation and Competency  
Kinniburgh and Blaustein

- Stay connected to your child
- Find support

# Finding the right treatment provider

- Questions to ask
  - What licenses do the counselors have?
    - LSW, LCSW, LAC, LPC, LCADC
  - How do you treat substance use disorders?
  - How do you address trauma and mental health issues?
  - What is your opinion of 12 Step meetings?
  - What is your opinion on medication-assisted treatment?
  - What are the grounds for administrative discharge?
- Sometimes a program or therapist is not a good fit, but don't give up!

# What might this all mean?

“In our detailed study of over 17,000 middleclass American adults of diverse ethnicity, we found that the compulsive use of nicotine, alcohol and injected street drugs increases proportionally in a strong, graded, dose response manner that closely parallels the intensity of adverse life experiences during childhood....Our findings are disturbing to some because they imply that the basic causes of addiction lie within us and the way we treat each other, not in drug dealers and dangerous chemicals. They suggest that billions of dollars have been spent everywhere except where the answer is to be found.

Vince Felliti, 2004

# Resources

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network
  - Adolescent Substance Abuse Toolkit
- The Body Keeps the Score – Bessel van der Kolk
- In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts – Gabor Mate
- John Hari
  - Chasing the Scream
  - TED Talk: Everything we know about addiction is wrong