

Chapter 9

Trauma-Informed Care in Support of Autism

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that trauma can intensify autism spectrum disorder symptoms. Autism is a developmental disability that causes significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges. Individuals with autism experience trauma ranging from exclusion to violence. In fact, many research studies indicate that people with autism have higher risks of traumatic experiences such as financial hardship, mental illness, substance abuse, trauma, and separation from their family. The chapter will address why individuals with autism are more likely to experience and struggle from traumas, how isolation can contribute to trauma, the symptoms of trauma in an autistic individual, and how trauma-informed care can help support improvements.

INTRODUCTION

Having a child with a disability is an experience that is difficult to describe. There are great highs and significant moments of love and there are great challenges that in the moment appear insurmountable. As a parent, one of my most distinct memories is dropping my son off at school. I made sure my son went to school and I fought for his inclusion. I knew it would be critical for my son to be “in the world” from the beginning. While I took these critical steps of placing my son in

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7732-5.ch009

the K-12 system, and I knew this was the “right” decisions, this process also created trauma. While we realize children with disabilities experience confusion, struggles and bullying that absolutely lead to trauma, the parents experience trauma as well. When I would drop my son off at school, as my car would pull away, I could see my son standing alone on the playground. While I have never forgotten this experience, when I remember it, the emotions felt during those drop off days are just as real and on the surface. For me, dropping my son off at school where I knew he might struggle throughout his day, was traumatic.

Research indicates that trauma can intensify Autism Spectrum Disorder symptoms (Fuld, 2018). Autism is a developmental disability that causes significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. Individuals with autism experience trauma, trauma ranging from exclusion to violence. In fact, many research studies indicate that people with autism have higher risks of traumatic experiences such as financial hardship, mental illness, substance abuse, trauma and separation from their family (Kerns, Newschaffer & Berkowitz, 2015). These events can lead to increased anxiety or even long term post-traumatic stress disorder. To date there is little research examining the experience of trauma in people with autism. This is puzzling as we can intuitively see that individuals with autism are at a higher risk of experiencing negative social experiences. Consider that the autistic individual has communications barriers and limited social circles both of which can make recovering from trauma very challenging. The following chapter will define trauma informed care, address why individuals with autism are more likely to experience and struggle from traumas, how isolation can contribute to trauma, the symptoms of trauma in an autistic individual and how trauma informed care can help support improvements.

DEFINITION OF TRAUMA INFORMED CARE

Cleary et al. (2020) define Trauma Informed Care as recognizing the needs of survivors by focusing on a system wide design and support during recovery, minimizing the risk of re-traumatization, and maximizing choice and empowerment for new adaptations and post traumatic growth. The Center for Disease Control describes Six Principles to Trauma Informed Care (2020)(Appendix: Figure 1):

- Safety – ensure physical and emotional safety.
- Trustworthiness – maximize trustworthiness, making tasks clear maintaining appropriate boundaries.
- Peer Support – peer support and self-help services offer to provide safety and hope.

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