

Trauma and Identity

OSLO 9.5.2025

Agenda

Psychotrauma in general

Identity

Trauma and Identity

Transgenerational trauma

A trauma is



„ ... A VITAL EXPERIENCE OF DISCREPANCY BETWEEN THREATENING SITUATIONAL FACTORS AND THE INDIVIDUAL'S COPING CAPACITIES, THAT IS ASSOCIATED WITH EMOTIONS OF HELPLESSNESS AND THE LACKING OF ANY PROTECTION THUS CREATING A PERMANENT INSTABILITY OF THE SELF CONCEPT AND THE CONCEPTION OF THE WORLD.“

(FISCHER UND RIEDESSER, 1999, S. 79)

Psychological trauma means any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g., rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place.

<https://dictionary.apa.org/trauma> 14.4.2025

A life experience becomes not only stressful but traumatic

if we face a risk for our body and/or psyche, and are incapable of dealing with it with the help of our stress programs.

Our stress programs make the situation even worse for us.

Therefore we end up in a state of helplessness and agony and the stress programs have to be stopped and suppressed.



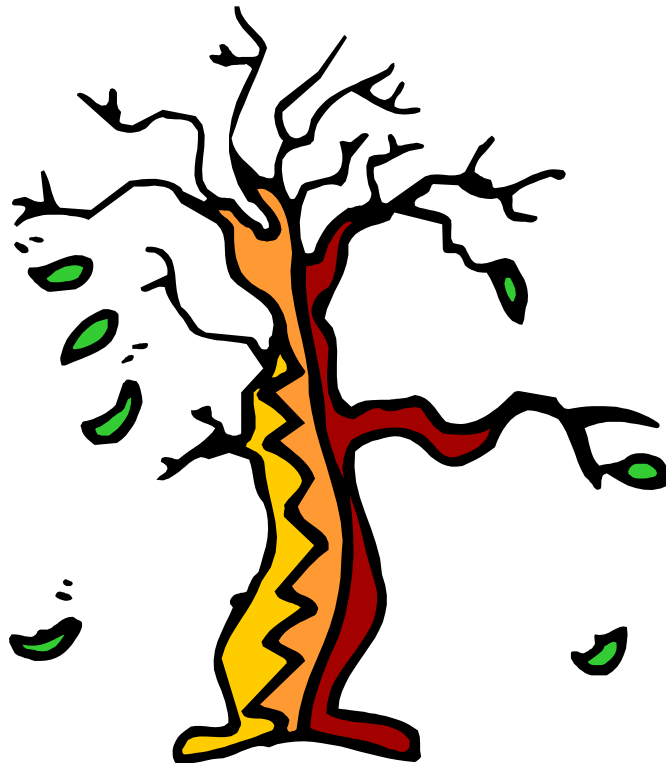
The traumatic process



traumatizing situation
experiencing the trauma
short-, medium- and
longterm consequences of
a trauma

Franz Ruppert

A trauma is an injury of



the physical body
the psyche
the social relations

General consequences of a trauma



hyperarousal and
hypervigilance

extreme anxieties and panic

permanent feelings of
helplessness, hopelessness,
sadness

numbing of feelings

intrusions of the traumatic
situation in the mind
(pictures, sounds, smells,
taste)

General consequences of a trauma



Avoidance behavior

Extreme anger and rage

Extreme feelings of shame or disgust

Feelings of unreality

Somatization

Losing bonding capacities

One of the most significant consequence of a trauma can be an inability to manage bonding relations without stress.



The Trauma-emergency- mechanism consists of:

Immobilization of the body

Freezing of our feelings

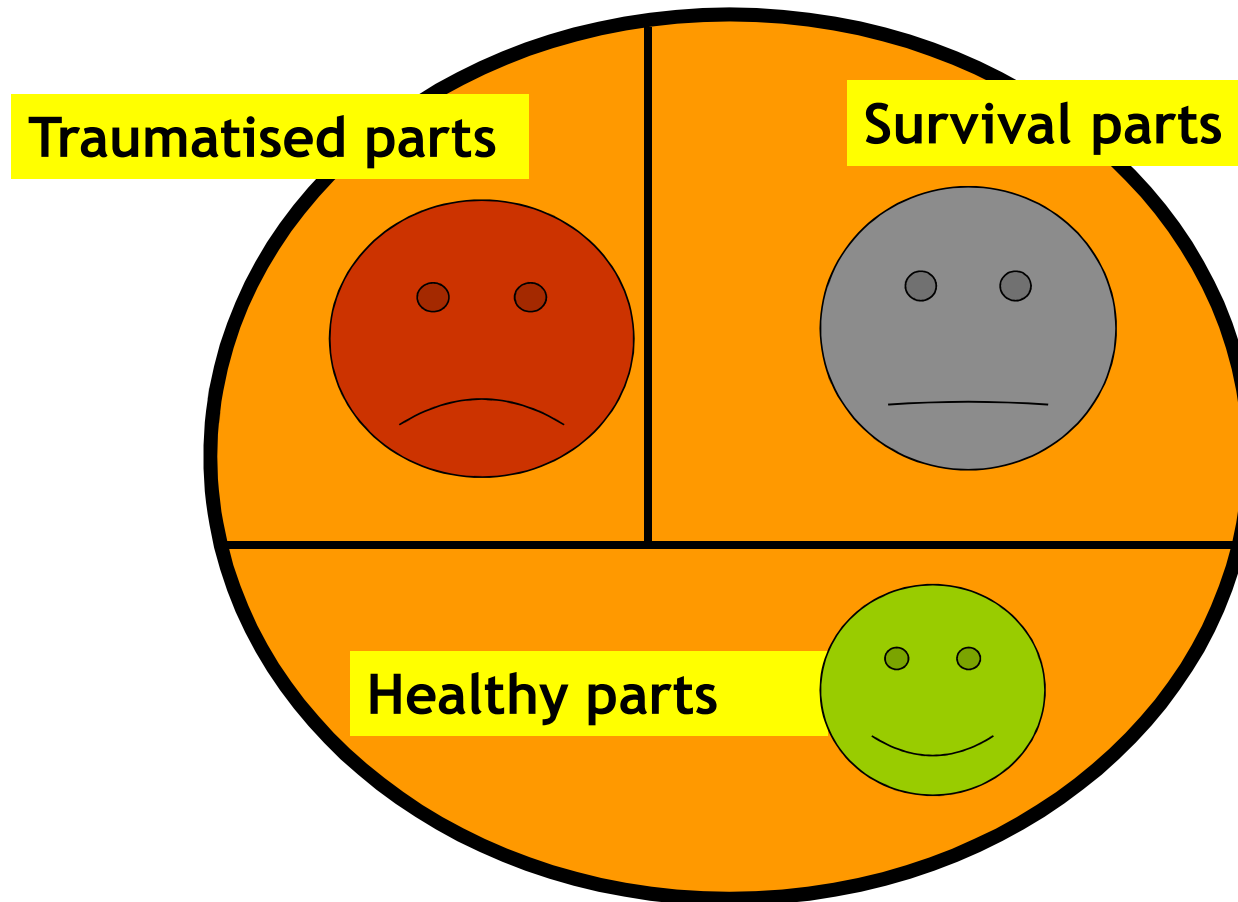
Dissociating in our mind

Splitting the structure of the psyche

It helps us to survive.



Structural splitting of the psyche after a traumatizing experience



Psychotraumata as Shocking Trauma



- Trauma of existential Threat (being involved in a life threatening event, e.g. a car accident or assassination attempt)
- Trauma of existential Loss (losing a person to whom one is deeply bonded, e.g. an own child)

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Psychotraumata as a Relational-Trauma



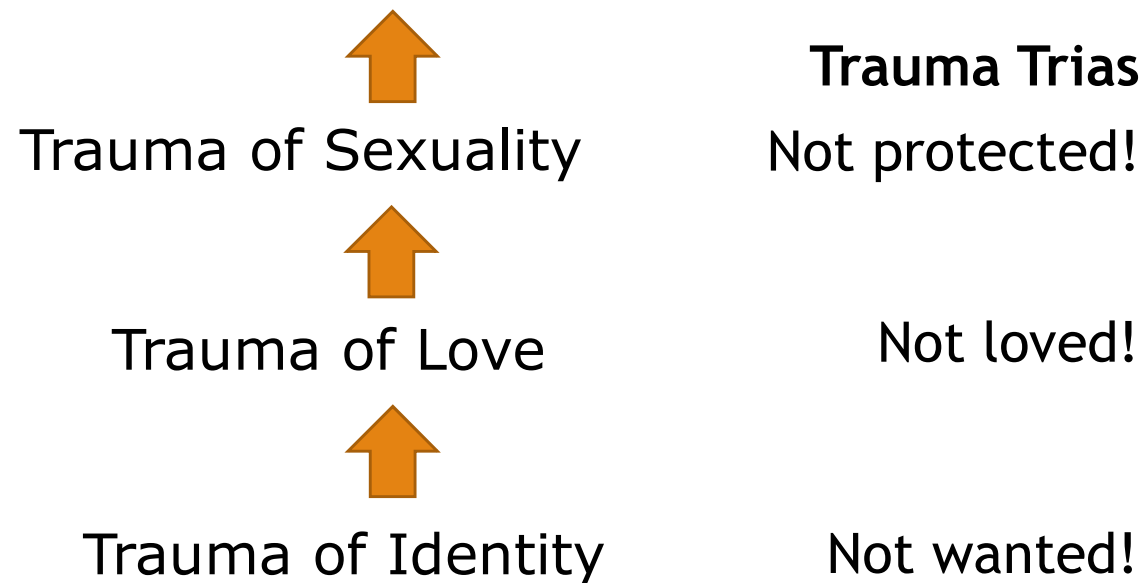
- Trauma of Love (being rejected by the person one needs to bond to, e.g. from the mother)
- Traumatization of a bonding system (perpetrator-victim-dynamics in a bonding system caused by violence, incest or murder)

Every type of trauma is combined with a specific set of symptoms

- physical
- emotional
- cognitive
- behavioral.

The different types of trauma are also correlated with typical surviving strategies.

Trauma by becoming a perpetrator oneself



Traumabiography based on IoPT

Definition of Identity

Identity (lat. idem the same) describes the way in which people perceive and understand themselves from their biographical development (biography) in the constant confrontation with their social environment. Important determinants that enter into the constitution of one's own identity are, for example, gender, age and social origin, ethnicity, nationality and group membership, occupation and social status, but also personal characteristics and competences.

<https://dorsch.hogrefe.com>

Identity = Who am I?

My identity is the sum of all my life experiences and how I did respond to them.

This includes my beautiful days as well as my trauma.

I can't leave anything out if I want to know who I am.

Healthy Identity means: | = |

A healthy 'I'
In connection with my
own free will
With all my senses
In contact with my body
With my own feelings
With my own words
In all my relationships



Development of Identity

The human child exists immediately after conception as a unique organism also developing her own unique psyche. The child develops as a subject and is an Individuum (not divided), as long as she does not become traumatised. She has a felt sense of being I and becomes increasingly self aware.

The child learns through his own actions that 'I' can influence and change my environment by my intentions and my will.



Development of Self awareness

The 'I' of the child develops from the beginning in relation to the psyche and the 'I' of the child's mother.

If a child can develop healthily, after two years he will already have a distinct and conscious self-concept.

When the child is 2-3 years old, he is able to use personal pronouns correctly, like 'me', 'mine', 'yours' etc.

If the 'I' of his mother is clearly perceptible for the child, this will support him also to clearly know who he is.

If not this can cause identity insecurities or even disorders for him.



Brain research, pre-frontal Cortex and Identity

“As self control is a process organized in the pre-frontal cortex, the conclusion is that there are also internal images of the ‘I’, and similarly internal pictures of others.

The development of a ‘felt’ I or self, and an inner image of another, has to take place in the brain of the baby, and these two processes are interwoven from the beginning” (Bauer 2015, S. 48 f., translated by F.R.)



Identification: I = You, I = We



Processes of Identification

The development of 'I' is embedded in the development of the psychological categories of 'we' and 'us'.

The first 'we' is "I and my mother".

Further entities of 'we': "I and my father", "I and my brother/sister", "I and my family", "I and my friends", "I and my colleagues", "I and my husband/wife", "I and my children", "I and my country" ...

Processes of Identification

All offers to identify with 'we' and 'us' initially come from outside.

The small child normally accepts those offers without question.

Only later in life we can freely choose between different offers of 'we'. To whom and to which group of humans do I really want to belong?

The fulfillment of symbiotic necessities like

- being nurtured
- being kept warm
- having body contact
- being held
- having eye contact
- being understood
- being supported
- belonging exclusively to another person
- being welcomed



... support identification of the child with the 'we'.

Own desires for Autonomy like



to perceive, feel, think for yourself
to be independent
to find balance in yourself
to rely on your abilities to act
to be and feel free
to decide by yourself

... support distinction of the child from the 'we'.

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Identifications we choose ourselves can be ...

the sports team from our home country

the region in which we live

the company in which we work

the stars from sports, movies and the music industry

fantasy figures or

values in our society



Identifications we choose...

Do such identifications support or hinder the development of our healthy identity?

Do they cause a distraction from developing our own healthy I?



Attributions: You = I; You = We



Different forms of Attributions

Giving names to children: Ann, Peter ...

Attributing attitudes to someone (he/she is 'good', 'nice', 'naughty' ...)

Religions: baptising a child as Christian, Moslem, Jewish...

Nationalities: Declaring someone as German, British, Norwegian, Turkish, Russian ...

Political attributions: You are our ally, our enemy, a terrorist

...

Attributions...

Include and exclude

Create the necessity for belonging to a group

Can also put pressure on human beings to fulfill expectations

Can enforce idealisation and devaluation

Can increase competition

Can create pictures of enemies

Can limit the space for developing one's own healthy identity

what does Psychotrauma do
to our Identity?

The Trauma of Identity means ...

- Having to give up one's healthy 'I' and free will
- in order to survive extreme and permanent violence and rejection.
- This can happen already at a very early stage of development by being not wanted by ones mother and/or father.
- I should not be at all or not as I am.



The Trauma of Identity produces the need and habit for...

- identifying with perpetrators (e.g. with the rejecting mother or father)
- looking for substitute identities (e.g. a professional role)
- accepting attributions without question

Concept of transgenerational trauma

Trauma does not only influence the life of a traumatized individual but can also affect the life of children and grandchildren of this person.

It can have an impact on communities.

Transgenerational trauma is the psychological and physiological effects that the trauma experienced by people has on subsequent generations in that group. The primary mode of transmission is the shared family environment of the infant causing psychological, behavioral and social changes in the individual.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transgenerational_trauma,

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Examples for Transgenerational Trauma

- Holocaust-Survivors and their families
- Families that survived wars and escape
- Progeny of enslaved families and victims of racism
- Indigenous people that had to suffer from colonialism, expulsion and forced assimilation
- Victims of political persecution

Holocaust Survivors and their families

- Survivor's guilt
- Excessive fear of loss
- Difficulty distinguishing between real and irrational threats
- Strong conflicts of loyalty within the family
- Over-identification of the children with the suffering of the parents

"They don't suffer from the same trauma. Those who have experienced it are focused on survival and know what they have to do, to have survived is their victory.

The others are clueless. They come into the world helpless, and an event weighs on them that is not talked about – but the dimensions of which are so monstrous that they feel crushed by it and cannot help but measure everything by this cubit, and measured against it, nothing lasts. Neither her life nor everything else.

What else can they do but look for an answer they can't find." (W. Waisbrot, Jewish Museum Munich)

Transgenerational Trauma and Indigenous People

- Loss of Identity
- Chronic stress
- Higher rates of violence, depression and suicide
- High prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse
- Identity Conflicts and Cultural Alienation

Slavery and Rassism

- Increased susceptibility to stress
- Increased risk of mental illnesses in the subsequent generations.

What if your (grand)parents are perpetrators?

Identifications with perpetrator values
and attitudes

or

Shame and feeling guilty and trying to
atone

Psychological Mechanism to transfer trauma

Many traumatized parents avoid talking about their experiences.

The silence makes the children feel that something is wrong.

Children take over/identify with unspoken feelings like anxieties, grief, rage, shame or distrust

This can lead to anxiety disorders and insecurities.

Parentification

Children of traumatized parents often take responsibility early on because they perceive their parents constantly suffering.

They feel responsible for the well-being of the family, which can lead to chronic overwhelm.

The child feels left alone and not seen.

„The War in me“

“How much soldier is still alive in me? Sebastian Heinzl asks himself when he learns from the Wehrmacht archives that his grandfather fought in Russia during the Second World War. Grandpa Hans had never told his family about the mission.

Inspired by these discoveries, the filmmaker travels to the places where his grandfather was stationed as a soldier. He encounters unexpected connections to his own life and to his war dreams, which have been haunting him for decades. As Sebastian gets deeper into the search, he gets his father involved, which breaks a silence that has blanketed his father and brings the two closer together. The film shows how knots in one's own family history can be loosened and how changes can be made.”

https://german-documentaries.de/en_EN/films/the-war-in-me.12919

Social psychological mechanisms of trauma transference

Passing on a culture of fear and mistrust

Intergenerational poverty and deprivation

Suffering from racism and structural discrimination

Epigenetics

Epigenetics changes in the DNA may influence the regulation of stress hormones.

They can increase the risk for unusual behavior or even mental diseases.

Mice that were conditioned with electroschock on cherry blossom fragrance also in the following generations showed fear reactions when exposed to cherry blossom (Dias & Ressler 2014).

Also to take into account

Resilience could be transferred from one generation to the next as well.

There is an intense search for healing.

There is a higher consciousness for social justice.

What can help?

Individual traumatherapy

Therapy with families

Acknowledgment of
indigenous wisdom

Social justice

Political awareness of the
transgenerational effects
of violence and war

Identity oriented Psychotrauma Therapy (IoPT)

Helps one's true identity to grow

Makes one's surviving strategies conscious

Dissolves entangled identifications

Questions attributions

Can interrupt the transgenerational transmission of trauma

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