

# Chapter 2: Defining Trauma

The experience of trauma can be looked upon as existing on a continuum from mild stress to severe traumatic stress. Mild stress stimulates the central nervous system, the immune system, the adrenal system and the cardiovascular system. It results in an increase of blood flow to major organs and muscles, neurotransmitter release, and the production of CRF hormone. The effect on the body is increased concentration, energy and memory. Mild stress therefore can result in increased performance and efficacy. Prolonged stress however, can deplete the body's capacity and result in negative consequences.

**In North America, four out of ten people are exposed to at least one traumatic event in their lifetime (Meichenbaum, 1994).**

<b>Physical Response</b>	<b>Effect</b>
Heart rate increases	Blood pressure increases
Respiration increases	Increased oxygen level
Blood flow increases to the muscles and brain	Increased readiness for physical movement, mental activity
Blood flow decreases to the stomach / other organs	blood redirected to essential muscles and brain
Increased Sweating muscle tension	Body temperature cooled to adjust for movement
Blood glucose increases	energy resources increased.

The optimum level of stress fluctuates based upon the life circumstance and needs. A low level of stress is generally good for maintenance but a moderate level of stress is optimum when action is required. A stressor can actually be positive in that it assists persons with motivation and drive and can be beneficial in improving the life. A moderate amount of stress can play a vital role in other ways as well. For example, one study found that patients with moderate levels of stress experienced better recovery than those with low levels. Patients with moderate levels of stress were more able to realistically appraise and handle the circumstances of their recovery. Patients with high levels of stress were overly anxious and unable to cope.

### Definitions:

- ❑ **Stress** - a powerful internal communication to raise awareness and increase energy. It is triggered by excessive internal, external or environmental demands or stimulation.
- ❑ **Traumatic Event** - A traumatic event is defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV (of the American Psychiatric Association 2000) as “*an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others.*”
  - **Type 1 Trauma** - refers to single incidents
  - **Type 2 Trauma** - refers to multiple incidents
- ❑ **Traumatic Stress** - stress resulting from exposure to, or witnessing of events that are severe and/or life threatening. The extent of traumatic stress experiences varies by duration of exposure and number of exposures. Additionally, the amount of stress incurred will vary according to the availability of resources and coping skills. (Terr, 1994)
  - **Type 1** will typically require less therapeutic intervention, although the person will likely experience reactions associated with trauma (see Chapter 3)
  - **Type 2r** (with previous resources). While experiencing typical reactions to trauma, people with multiple resources and prior positive coping experiences are more likely to separate present and past traumas.

**Traumatic  
Stress is stress  
resulting from  
exposure to, or  
witnessing of,  
events that are  
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life threatening.**

- **Type 2nr** (no previous resources). These persons will become overwhelmed with multiple traumas which appear to merge for the individual. Past resolution has not occurred and personality disorders may develop.

Traumatic stress has been given a variety of labels over the years. These labels generally attempt to convey cause in the terminology used.

Soldier's Heart, Battle Fatigue, War Neurosis, Da Costa's Syndrome, Tunnel Disease, Railway Spine Disorder, Shell Shock, Gross Stress Reaction, Adjustment Reaction of Adult Life, Transient Situational Disturbance, Traumatic Neurosis, Post-Vietnam Syndrome, Rape Trauma Syndrome, Child Abuse Syndrome, and Battered Wife Syndrome (Everly, 1995; Meichenbaum, 1994).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to differentiate specific manifestation due to precipitating event, it is important to recognize that manifestation may vary with some predictability due to the nature of the events. Appropriate treatment may vary accordingly.

- **Trauma Victim** - are those individuals who are impacted by a traumatic occurrence.
  - Primary Trauma Victim - individuals who are directly involved in the trauma.
  - Secondary Victim - individuals who are indirectly impacted by the trauma. These include relatives and loved ones, members of the immediate community or surrounding area, and of course may include relief workers and persons who respond to the incident, and people who experience the trauma through the media.
  
- **Psychotraumatology** - the study of psychological trauma and the factors that precipitate and follow the trauma as well as the factors that are present during trauma. (Everly, 1993, Mitchell and Everly, 1995.)

**Primary Trauma Victims are individuals who are directly involved in the trauma.**

**Secondary Trauma Victims are individuals who are indirectly impacted by the trauma.**

# Categories of Traumatic Events

Disasters occur naturally and frequently. They can be human-made or natural occurrences.

## Types of Trauma

There have been many attempts to categorize trauma. These categorization of traumatic occurrences generally are organized by: who or what is responsible for the trauma, the cause of the trauma, or by the nature of the trauma. The following will present those categorizations as well as the factors which impact the severity of trauma and traumatic responses.

## Responsibility Categorizations

Crises may be viewed as either natural, or human-made. Natural crises include those disasters that are created by the forces of nature such as tornados, hurricanes, and floods. When the cause is viewed as human-made, the reactions may be more emotionally devastating. Human-made disasters include building/structural collapse, medical/food tampering, chemical attacks/dispersement, ethnic cleansing, riots and wars, suicide, murder, and crime and violence. This is likely because the disaster is viewed as within the control of individual persons, and therefore avoidable. It is not only the acts themselves, but the threat of these acts which may have psychologically traumatizing impact. Society at large is at risk due to close proximity of persons in public and working spaces such as office buildings, public transportation and public events. Globally, people around the world have begun to see themselves as vulnerable.

- ❑ **Natural Disasters** - includes natural disasters such as tornados, hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, typhoons, floods, and tsunamis.
  
- ❑ **Human-made Disasters** include building/structural collapse, medical/food tampering, chemical attacks/dispersement, ethnic cleansing, riots and wars, suicide, murder, terrorism, and crime and violence.

**The three categorizations of trauma:**

**Who or what is responsible for the trauma;**

**The cause of the trauma;**

**The nature of the trauma.**

## Cause Categorizations

Events that lead to trauma may be expected, such as the death of a family member who is terminally ill, or unexpected, such as the 9/11 terrorist attack. Trauma can additionally be categorized as part of normal development such as when children leave their parents' home, or they can be specific to an unanticipated situation.

- ❑ **Developmental Trauma** - These crises are predictable because they occur as part of the maturation process. Developmental theorists believe that people progress through a series of life stages. During each of the life stages, there are particular tasks which must be resolved in order for the person to develop in a healthy fashion. If a person fails to accomplish the necessary task they may experience crises related to the lack of meeting developmental criteria (Erickson, 1963). Developmental theorists include Freud, Kohlberg, and Piaget.

For example, if during young adulthood a person fails to learn how to sustain committed and intimate relationships they will likely be unsatisfied in future relationships and find they lack intimate connectedness with others. Developmental crises might also include 'mid-life crises' or 'empty-nest syndrome'.

- ❑ **Situational Trauma**- These result from unanticipated events that are extraordinary in nature. These may happen at anytime in one's life and can include natural disasters such as tornado's and hurricanes, or they can be man-made disasters such as the terrorist attacks, suicides, automobile accidents, train crashes etc.

**While most trauma involves loss, specific types of loss are viewed as having some common elements which impact upon the severity of the trauma and the severity of the reaction to the trauma.**

## Nature of Event Categorization

Categorization by the nature of the event varies, but in general researchers attempt to group specific traumatic incidences into categories that reflect the pervasive shared elements of particular trauma. Thus, while most trauma involves loss, specific types of loss are viewed as having some common elements which impact upon the severity of the trauma and the severity of the reaction to the trauma. Factors which may increase traumatic severity include: predictability, controllability and intensity. Additionally, the reaction to trauma is impacted by the prolonged, repeated, or individual nature of the event or situation.

### Factors influencing severity of trauma and severity of reaction to trauma:

- Predictability** - generally the ability to anticipate or predict a trauma decreases severity.
- Controllability** - generally a lack of responsibility or control over the occurrence of a traumatic event decreases perception of severity.
- Intensity** - lower intensity events that impact at a lower loss level (emotionally, physically, spiritually) and that impact fewer people are generally considered less severe.
- Prolonged** - trauma which extends over a shorter period of time generally decreases severity of reaction.
- Repeated or Individual** - individual occurrences are considered to have a less severe impact than those traumatic events which entail repeated occurrences

**The severity of trauma is based upon:**

**Predictability  
Controllability &  
Intensity**

**Severity of response is also influenced if the trauma is a:**

**Prolonged,  
Repeated,  
or  
Individual  
occurrence**

The following is a categorization of trauma by the nature of the occurrence. Some of the factors which influence severity have been highlighted.

- ❑ **Natural Disasters** - includes natural disasters such as tornados, hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, typhoons, floods, and tsunamis. These disasters may have **low predictability** (such as fires and earthquakes) or there may be some advance notice giving people time to take precautions or vacate. The occurrence of natural disasters are generally considered to have **no or little controllability** although there may be some control over impact.
- ❑ **Personal Loss** - The most prevalent type of trauma is that of the loss of a person who has played a key role in the person's life. Losses may also include pets, jobs, or any familiar object or environment. This includes loss due to death, divorce, and separation. Separations can be marital, parental, siblings, or other important support persons. **Intensity of this trauma varies** by the intensity of the relationship with the person, object, or life situation. *Repeated personal losses without sufficient recovery time complicates and intensifies the reaction.*
- ❑ **Health Trauma** - Includes trauma due to the onset of disability or illness. **Intensity** is affected by the severity of the disability or illness and the effects upon typical and routine functioning and may also be affected by issues of self-blame. If the individual blames the disability on their own behaviors (driving under the influence of alcohol or participating in unprotected sexual activity) the trauma may be viewed by the individual as having high **controllability**.
- ❑ **Victimization** - Physical or emotional trauma results from abuse or neglect. This includes: physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Victimization can be **repeated, prolonged, or a single event**. These may subject the individual to a prolonged period of perceived or actual life threatening situations which increases the **intensity** of the event. Victims may blame themselves for behaviors prior or during the trauma increasing the perception of **controllability**.

**The most prevalent type of trauma is that of the loss of a person who has played a key role in the person's life.**

- **Criminal Violence** - victims are subject to a **individual** events such as robbery and homicide, and criminal assault in which they experienced a lack of control over their belongings and/or their bodies and may have been subjected to a life-threatening situation. Re-victimization may compound reactions.
  
- **Wars and Terrorism**: many of these are intense, massive in scale, and long-term in nature exposing victims to **repeated** life-threatening situations. Additionally, persons may have engaged in perpetrating violence against others. This may intensify the response to trauma because the perpetration can be seen as counter to the self-image. It may be particularly distressful if it comes to be viewed as an avoidable and controllable occurrence.