

DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA REHAB

This information sheet is a rough outline and intended to give general context to a highly complex and individual experience. It is also designed to give a sense of what the kind of trauma therapy I provide offers to the needs and experience of those of us who have experienced developmental trauma.

Developmental trauma

Unlike single incident trauma, like a car accident, developmental trauma happened with people who were supposed to be caring for us and it occurred while we were forming physically, psychologically and emotionally. This is what makes it so profound and why “rehab” takes a long time. We are deeply reweaving ourselves in relation to others and our world.

More about “rehab”

All trauma therapy (in the way it has been taught to me) asks the therapist to pay attention to three main aspects of your past (and sometimes present) experiences:

1. What was missing?
2. What didn't get to happen?
3. What got you through?

And then to offer connection to your strengths, unwind what is binding you, and to provide corrective, reparative experiences of relationship and opportunities to do what you need to do to reclaim your agency and allow your body and mind to come back into a sense of stability and ease.

What does this mean in developmental trauma?

1. Who, not what was missing

With developmental trauma “what” was missing is actually “who”: safe, loving, and reliable caregivers. We needed them to see us, hear us, celebrate us, soothe and guide us, help us make sense of ourselves (our experiences, sensations, feelings), others and our world.

2. What often didn't get to happen as a result of this?

Because we didn't have the caregivers we needed, we were often stuck in states of helpless vulnerability: vulnerable and needing help but unable to get it because our caregivers were offline or actively abusive. And so we needed to manage ourselves AND our caregivers and our situation. We often had to be the person they required us to be. This means we didn't get the experience of being seen and understood, able to safely or being able to reliably reach out for help.

This means we didn't get to develop, or develop fully our:

- sense of agency and ability to feel we can effectively deal with the world as it is.
- solid sense of self and worth (independent of but including our “doing”).
- sense of trust in our perceptions of the world.
- sense of trust in trustworthy others.
- healthy physiology (body) that can self-regulate without intense management.
- emotional landscape in a way that makes sense to us and that we can handle.
- relationship to the world where we feel safe and confident amidst the general vagaries of life.

And this means that we often feel:

- Anxious (no way to organise our feelings and thinking and thus settle)
- Depressed (not enough sense of agency or joy and aliveness)
- Angry (at ourselves or others beyond what is helpful)
- Scared (of too many things)
- Confused and lost (because we don't quite know who we are or how to deal)
- Chronically ill (because of the load on our physiology, still trying to manage the distress)

What was there that got you through includes:

- your own inner strengths, some of which you may not be aware of.
- your adaptive strategies (some of which may have outgrown their usefulness, but were still your excellent way of surviving).
- kind or helpful people, animals, places, activities.

What does this mean for therapy? What is the rehab?

To come out of our distress, to recover, to grow and develop, we need...safe and reliable caregivers, and companions along the road. We need people well-attuned enough to our needs to provide the reparative experiences that allow us to undo and re-form ourselves allowing the distressing symptoms (like chronic pain or insomnia) and feelings (like shame and terror) to become less and the sense of lovability no matter what, agency, joy, and connection to grow.

In short, we need people who can:

- see, hear, understand, celebrate us *and* help us see, hear, understand and celebrate ourselves.
- help us fill in the blanks of what was missing.
- help us find what got us through.
- help us understand our survival strategies and support us to find new ways of being.
- help us do what we didn't get to do (including thwarted fight and flight responses).

This is the role of the therapist. They are here to try and be that safe person you missed out on. And one who is here just for you, with the willingness and skills to understand what has happened to you, what was missing in your early caregiver relationships so we can provide that holding. We are also here to work out with you what you need and give you room to do what you didn't get to do back then, but can now.

A final word

It is worth noting that good friends and partners are also important in this healing process. We all always need people who see, understand and celebrate us, who encourage us to do what we need to stand up and be ourselves in the world. The difference is that therapists are here just for you. And our training is aimed at helping us to be the person you need us to be so you can grow yourself.

