

Trauma and Relationships: Interpersonal Neurobiology Put Into Practice

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have made great strides to understand the impact of trauma on clients across a lifespan. Data has shown that traumatic experience is very common among clients in urban areas seeking outpatient services. The presenters will discuss how trauma impacts attachment in regards to interpersonal connections including the therapeutic relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

How does early childhood trauma effect the formation of intimate relationships?

High levels of attachment anxiety are associated with emotion focused coping and a hyperactivating strategy that exaggerates emotions and help-seeking behaviors, whereas high levels of attachment avoidance are associated with instrumental coping and a deactivating strategy that minimizes the importance of emotions and close relationships.

DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA

- Specific events or experiences that occur within a given developmental stage and influence later development, adjustment, and physical and mental health. (SAMSA, 2015)
- Emotional maltreatment in childhood may engender psychological disorganization that contributes to emotional, cognitive, and relational disturbances in later life. (Riggs, S., Cusimano, A., & Benson, K., 2011).
- ACEs can negatively affect a person's well-being into adulthood. Whether or not these experiences occur simultaneously, are time-limited, or recur, they set the stage for increased vulnerability to physical, mental, and substance use disorders and enhance the risk for repeated trauma exposure across the lifespan (SAMSA, 2015)
- When a person experiences several adverse events in childhood, the risk of his or her heavy drinking, self-reported alcohol dependence, and marrying a person who is alcohol dependent is two to four times greater than that of a person with no ACEs (Dube, Anda, Felitti, Edwards, & Croft, 2002).

ACE Category	Women Percent (N = 9,367)	Men Percent (N = 7,970)	Total Percent (N = 17,337)
ABUSE			
Emotional Abuse	13.1%	7.6%	10.6%
Physical Abuse	2.7%	29.9%	28.3%
Sexual Abuse	24.7%	16%	20.7%
HOUSEHOLD CHALLENGES			
Mother Treated Violently	13.7%	11.5%	12.7%
Household Substance Abuse	29.5%	23.8%	26.9%
Household Mental Illness	23.3%	14.8%	19.4%
Parental Separation or Divorce	24.5%	21.8%	23.3%
Incarcerated Household Member	5.2%	4.1%	4.7%
NEGLECT			
Emotional Neglect ³	16.7%	12.4%	14.8%
Physical Neglect ³	9.2%	10.7%	9.9%

ACE Study, Adverse Childhood Experiences (2005)
<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>

IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS

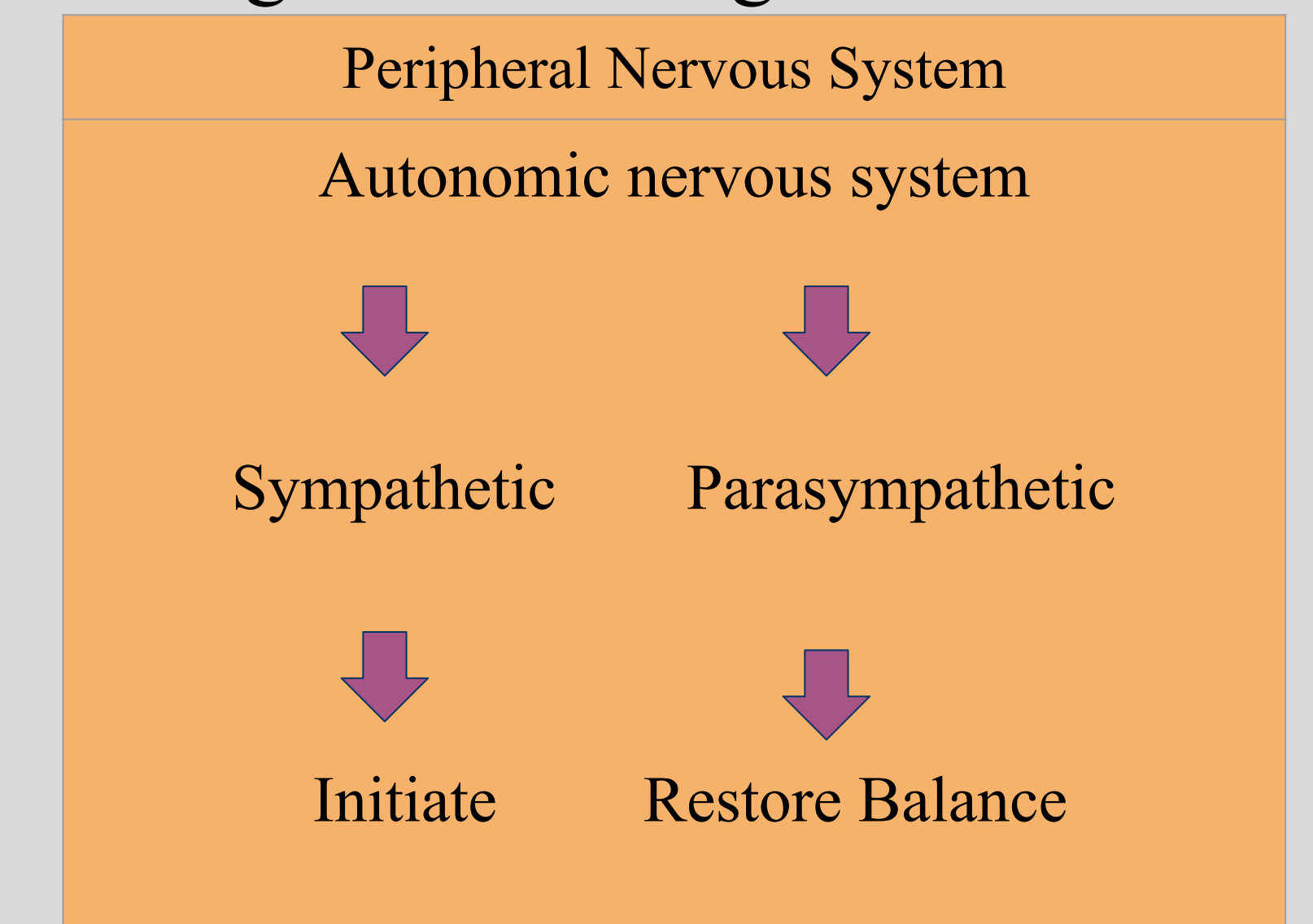
- At least one third of partners coming to couple therapy can have a history of child abuse (Anderson & Miller, 2006).
- Approximately 70% of attachment styles formed during childhood and adolescence are stable throughout adulthood and through marriage (Sharfe, 2003)
- Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse often struggle to experience felt security in romantic relationships (Johnson, 2002)
- Trauma often leads to the formation of a pursuer-distance pattern in relationships (Henry et al., 2011)
- Partners of traumatized individuals tend to experience what has sometimes been called Secondary Traumatic Stress (Figley, 1998))
- One study with over 1,000 participants revealed that individuals who experienced abuse and neglect were not significantly less likely to marry, but 2x as likely to walk out on a romantic partner and 2x as likely to get divorced. (Colman & Widom, 2004)

THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP

- Systemically oriented practitioners recognize that the behaviors of one person often elicit the opposing tendencies in others. In couples therapy, contrasting attachment patterns within a couple may present a problem for therapists (Riggs, S., Cusimano, A., Benson, K., 2011).
- Trauma often heightens the need for secure connections while also impairing the complex ability to form those connections. (Johnson & Lebow, 2000)
- Anxiously attached individuals might have trouble experiencing security in close relationships because desirable experiences of closeness tend to elicit memories of "attachment injuries" (Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin, 2001)
- Avoidant individuals might struggle to identify vulnerable thoughts and feelings in close relationships (Shachner, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2003).

INTERPERSONAL NEUROBIOLOGY

- "Neurons that fire together wire together, neurons that fire apart, wire apart"- Hebb's Law
 - Creates insight into the development of, and difficulty in breaking, patterns of thinking and behaving



Neuroplasticity

<p>Neurogenesis: region-specific phenomenon wherein new neurons are formed</p>	<p>Synaptogenesis: Creation of new synapses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use-it or lose-it dictum, synapses can be generated based on need, while unnecessary synapses are pruned away in order to make the system more efficient
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IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Attention to the history and relational styles of both romantic partners is important (Riggs, K., Cusimano, A., & Benson, K., 2011).
- Normalize reactivity, promote acceptance of internal experience (Fishbane, 2007)
- Explore here-and-now partner reactions in light of the past (Fishbane, 2007)
- Help couples learn to take a time-out (Fishbane, 2007)
- Counselors must remain attuned and aid clients in responding to the somatic/physiological effects of interpersonal stress
 - Increased heart rate
 - Flushed face
 - Increased perspiration
 - Tightening of the muscles
 - Shaking of the hands and/or body

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