

Information on Complex-PTSD / Developmental Trauma Disorder and some of the messages you may have internalized early on in life that made it difficult for to develop proper self-esteem as you grew up.

When we're looking at any form of trauma, what happens when the brain is traumatized, is that it's not able to put your experiences in into proper context. In the case of single instance trauma, which is most often what we think of as PTSD, the brain ends up retaining either too much information about what may be relevant to that event. If a traumatic event happened, and at the time it happened you were looking at someone across the street wearing a red shirt your brain might internalize red shirts mean danger and then in the future when you see a red shirt your body is going to respond with a trigger or you might retain not enough information about the traumatic event. If you go into a dissociative response it's possible that you won't be forming memories properly around what led to that event which could lead you to underestimating danger in similar situations in the future.

Trauma disrupts our ability to process memories properly and place our memories into proper context. In the case of Complex-PTSD, which is what we call a series of traumatic events that happen to us, usually early on in life, at a time when our brains were still developing, we have entire systems of meaning we form around incomplete forms of processing. When we grow up with CPTSD, often we develop a series of mental health challenges, and neurosis difficulties in certain areas of our lives because we don't have the ability to make sense of why we're struggling with all of those things and because we don't see them as what they are, which is trauma response. As a result, we developed a sense of toxic shame, which is this idea that something I don't understand is wrong with me, or everything bad that happens to me in life is my fault and there's nothing I can do about it because I don't really understand why I am just so different and bad and flawed relative to everybody else.

What would it have been like if you had someone who could have guided you through your early life, helping you understand and make sense of why you were developing in a way that was not necessarily similar or identical to the people around you and how you could lend yourself compassion in those areas instead of ascribing all of them to the fact that there is something wrong with you. Here are ten lessons that may have helped you to understand in childhood that you can now retroactively apply to your understanding of yourself if you grew up with Complex-PTSD.

The first lesson that every person with CPTSD should have been taught in childhood is that the neurotic behavior and emotional regulation strategies you almost definitely developed if you have Complex PTSD are not character defects, they are trauma responses. If you have trouble with things like eating disorders, substance abuse, social difficulties, obsessive thought patterns, chronically low self-esteem, all of these things and many other things that you may have been struggling with are not things that you chose, they are the mind and body's normal response to a set of abnormal circumstances.

If you were missing some key element that you needed for health and healthy emotional development, your brain is going to do the best it can in order to help you self-regulate and your brain's best attempt at self-regulation, if it doesn't have the tools to actually contextualize your emotions and make sense of what you are feeling and why, is going to

be to develop things like really rigid behavior patterns, addictions, anxieties, or depression in a lot of cases. All of those things are going to make it difficult to do things, like give yourself a sense of stability in life or the ability to form healthy attachment relationships because you simply did not learn enough of the necessary skills to do those things in the "normal" way. But none of that was a choice, which is likely what you were led to believe growing up if you didn't have any context for why you were doing any of that.

You probably learned I am just doing all of this weird stuff and behaving in weird ways because I am a different, flawed, wrong, broken person. Anyone who grows up emotionally deprived, or in some other significant way traumatized, who does not receive the proper care and support that they need to make sense of their experience will develop neurotic patterns of thinking and feeling and behaving as a result of that trauma. This would have happened to anyone in your shoes it is not something that you chose, so the idea we're trying to get at here is that the toxic shame you feel is not as personal as you might think it is. It is the normal response to the life that you had, not a true reflection of the quality of your soul.

The second thing you may never have learned if you have Complex-PTSD is that the average secure person actually intuitively knows is that it is almost impossible to concentrate when you are dysregulated so when you are in a fight flight freeze or fawn response your body is pumping blood to the areas of your brain that are designed to help you escape danger and stay alive and those are not the parts of your brain that help you to focus deeply on details or on abstract thinking. Focusing on details and abstract thinking is a lot of what school is as we grow up, it's a lot of what work entails as adults for most of us. Many of us who grew up with Complex-PTSD might be really really hard on ourselves around the fact that we struggle so much with focus when in reality that is a normal response to being in chronic fight or flight mode. It's not because you just don't have the grit to get through things that you find unpleasant, it is in large part because you are chronically triggered.

The fact that you may have trouble focusing is not because there's something wrong with you, it's because you are emotionally dysregulated much of the time. The most secure person in the world faced with that degree of emotional dysregulation, without a reprieve from it, or a way to understand it and how to work with it, would also have every bit as much trouble concentrating as you do. As we engage in trauma work we can start to heal, but the first step in the process of healing from it is simply acknowledging that there is a reason it's happening and it's not a moral failing.

Something that those with Complex-PTSD may not have internalized is that it's incredibly important to understand that people need the most help, care, empathy and support when they are struggling the most. When we have toxic shame there's a very rapid calculation our brain does when we mess something up, make a mistake or get something wrong - it doubles down on self-criticism. The reason the brain thinks its time to double down on self-criticism after you have made a mistake is because you probably paid a very high cost for mistakes early on in life. Very likely, getting something wrong led to very severe consequences and when that's the learning model that the brain develops around your brain starts prioritizing not getting things wrong above trying to get things right. In that instance, your brain essentially becomes an inhibition machine

much more than a learning exploring and growing machine, which is what a healthy child is supposed to be doing.

Caregivers are meant to hold children in healthy environments where they feel safe enough to try make mistakes, get things wrong and then receive love and mentorship when they do get things wrong. When they mess up, when they are acting out, when they are not behaving, a healthy caregiving environment recognizes this is as a child who needs extra care and support. A child who gets that care and support when they're struggling early on in life also learns as an adult, when I am struggling, when I am making a higher than average amount of mistakes, that's an indication that I need a little bit of extra love care and support from myself right now or from the people around me. Instead of going inward into that critical parent-self and doubling down on self-loathing, they tend to turn outward to their friends and loved ones who can give them a little bit of extra support and guidance or towards their loving inner parent who can help them understand and make sense of the mistakes that they made so that they're actually able to learn from their mistakes instead of just keep them super present in their awareness to avoid making the same one again in the future.

It is normal to not know things that you have never been taught and it is also normal to not know things that you have been taught because you were dissociated while they were taught to you. If you are in a state of low or high-grade dissociation you are by definition, not forming memories properly. Many people with Complex-PTSD spent a great deal of their early years intermittently dissociated and can develop areas of deep shame where there are basic life lessons that other people learned early on and that we know we were technically taught as well, but for whatever reason we can't seem to remember well enough or keep our focus on those areas. We feel embarrassed as adults about all of these kind of knowledge and skill gaps that we might have but it is a perfectly normal thing to not be able to remember and internalize information that our whole selves were not present for during the learning process because the learning process requires us to be both emotionally and intellectually present.

When we grow up with so many of these knowledge and skill gaps we often start to internalize a deep sense of shame around everything that we don't know and often don't even stop to check in and question, have I ever learned this thing? Maybe I'm at a new job and my supervisor is explaining the rules to me and they might actually be expecting me to stop them and ask questions around what I don't understand but if I have this deep internalized shame that I should just already know everything regardless of whether or not I've been taught it I'm probably not going to stop and ask questions as they come up. Instead, I'm just going to notice what I don't understand and then go into a shame spiral about it because that's what my brain naturally learned to do again to avoid making the potential mistakes of asking for clarification on something.

For the person with Complex-PTSD the idea that you don't know something because you're so used to having those experiences of skill and knowledge gaps is so shame inducing that you might not even be stopping in your day-to-day daylight to sort out what do I not know because I was dissociated when learning it early on in life which is where you might have that shame naturally arise versus what do I not know because I actually have never been taught it full stop in a dissociated or associated state. In either case it's beneficial to give ourselves compassion, but it is also important to note that sometimes we are assuming we ought to know things that there is no way we could

possibly know. We cannot know anything we have not been taught so it's not inherently shameful to have a knowledge gap and it's also not shameful to have knowledge gaps around things we were dissociated when learning. This is an awareness you likely have to walk into very slowly as you heal and learn that you now exist within a world where it's safer than it once was.

In order for life to feel meaningful you have to get to know yourself and figure out what your unique wants interests and passions are and then to align your life with those things. When you grow up with Complex-PTSD, one of the main things you internalize is that you cannot trust your feelings. Your feelings, if you express them fully, are likely to lead to significant repercussions. Instead, you probably learned some version of, I'm going to look around me check on what everybody else is doing and then try to copy what other people are doing without stopping to check in to see how I'm feeling and what I want to do and then build my actions around that. While that strategy may help us avoid significant consequences or punishments it also does not allow us to figure out what is going to make our life feel deeply satisfying.

If you feel like your life is perpetually kind of empty and even things that make other people really happy don't seem to do it for you, it's probably not because you're broken or have something inherently wrong with you, it's probably because there was a lot of shame in the way of you truly getting to know yourself growing up and you weren't able to make decisions from a meaningful place. The idea here is, that one of the things you might be missing major context on if you grew up with Complex-PTSD - is yourself and who you are and what matters to you and all of those things are what goes into building a life that feels meaningful.

Something else you may not have learned if you grew up with Complex-PTSD, is that your triggers are not your core authentic self. When thinking of someone with toxic shame or complex PTSD, think of the self-concept as three-layered. On the top layer there is the mask or the fake-self that you learn to present to the world in order to get by in life. Underneath that mask there's this layer of trauma triggers, so things like your neurotic or obsessive patterns of thinking and behaving, or your emotional dysregulation, or your challenges with forming and maintaining healthy intimate relationships. You might believe if you have Complex-PTSD that the second layer is your core authentic self.

When you hear other people say, just be yourself, just let other people get to know you, you might think no, no, no, you don't understand, my core authentic self is a bad, broken person, if other people got to know that person they would hate me! In reality there's a layer that exists beneath that layer and what exists beneath that layer is the raw core of you, the part of you that just feels things very clearly and cleanly and directly.

Often that version of you is the version of you that you spend the least time with, because Layer Two involves so much shame for you and tells you the story that whatever is beneath here is definitely going to be completely wrong. Toxic shame leads to chronic dysregulation, the belief that you mistake your traumatic responses for your core self. They are not the same, and the beautiful thing about this is that the more we gain an awareness of who our true selves are and of the fact that there is absolutely nothing wrong with us in our raw authentic state, that place becomes the solid ground that we can begin standing on in order to gain the strength and perspective to start working with our trauma triggers, our neurosis and our toxic shame.

This type of work can be a long process, but the process begins with recognizing that there's a difference between you, your core self, or your soul if that's an easier thing for you to think of it as, and you, your disregulated traumatized triggered self. One is a series of responses that you developed as a normal reaction to the circumstances you were in and the other is your true human self, and that's what we start to uncover and interact with more and more as we move through the healing process.

It may have been helpful for you to know growing up with Complex-PTSD is that a lot of time when you're procrastinating, what you are actually doing is spending the appropriate amount of time responding to really intense and overwhelming feelings. If we are living with this chronic, toxic shame, our brains are going to be spending a lot of time desperately trying to get us out of that shame state and trying to get us to find anything in our environment or in ourselves that makes us feel okay and like it is a good thing for us to want to keep getting up in the mornings and trying again. If you have a high number of things in your life that trigger you into a toxic shame spiral, which is highly likely if you have Complex-PTSD, essentially anytime one of those triggers goes off you are no longer in relationship with the thing you were doing, you are now in relationship with your own trauma response and that is a very time consuming thing to be in relationship with.

You may not have learned growing up with Complex-PTSD that other people are chronically taking cues from you around how to interact with you and sometimes what you think is senseless rejection is in fact a product of other people not knowing how to read you properly. Growing up with toxic shame or Complex-PTSD means that you usually learn to inhibit quite a bit of your self-concept, but you might not be conscious of the fact that you were doing that because you learned to do it so young to hide certain emotions or certain inner states from the people around you that you might actually have no idea that you are not wearing your emotions on your face and your body to the same degree as other people.

Others might not be able to read you as clearly as they can read other more secure leaning people because you may have a significant amount of emotional inhibition going on that you are not aware of. When you're feeling down or when you're struggling with something the look on your face might be one of grumpiness that other people kind of read as, don't talk to me, or you might chronically mask in a way that causes you to always look upbeat and cheerful even when you are absolutely dying inside. When this is the case other people do not get the appropriate cues from you or go they don't know how to check in with you and attune to you the way that they do to each other. This is not necessarily because they don't care about you, it could be because they have no idea what is going on for you. This can become a kind of spiraling problem because if you don't know how to access a lot of your emotion states and emote them to other people you might also have trouble forming close connections so this might make it into the realm of reality where you truly do have less people who are coming to you and checking in on you and vice versa because you haven't learned the connecting skills that other people learned early on, a key part of those being showing your emotions a little bit all of the time.

This problem is again compounded by the fact that if you have trauma triggers active, your emotions might be much bigger than the average person's especially if you've not received any support for working through that trauma. By adulthood you might be

unconsciously and consciously inhibiting. The important thing here to keep in mind, is to note that we want to make sure we're giving things the right attribution. If you notice that you struggle socially, more so than the average person, either in terms of forming connections or forming intimate connections that you can actually rely on for emotional support it probably isn't because you're flawed and broken and someone who nobody would ever care to be close to. It might be because there are social skills you genuinely missed learning about early on in life that make it hard for other people to know how to connect with you and this is once again something that can be worked on in the healing process.

Something you may not have learned if you have complex PTSD is that good people do bad things and the degree to which we recover from those bad things and learn how to behave in a more pro-social way is often in direct proportion to how much love and guidance we receive if when you were young anytime you made a mistake or messed something up or hurt somebody, which everybody does. Every person out there makes mistakes and hurts other people sometimes really badly when we have people and environments and communities that we trust who can help guide us through those mistakes and show us how to behave in a more pro-social empathetic way without writing us off as people in the process of that that is how we learn to exist in a healthy way in the world and as adults if we are not used to receiving any sort of guidance or support from our environments when we make mistakes and when we hurt other people.

Instead of looking around us for guidance and care and empathy and help in righting our wrongs, we learn to simply inhibit and berate ourselves and go back into those toxic shame beliefs of, I am a bad person person who hurts other people. It is important to internalize in the healing process that mistakes will happen for the rest of your life. As we start to heal from insecure attachment or Complex-PTSD or early trauma one of the main things we learn is that if we are honest with ourselves and other people about why we made the mistakes we did and why we hurt people in the ways that we did we slowly learn over time how to behave in a way that respects both our pain and other people's pain in equal measure.

The healthier we get the more we learn to surround ourselves with healthy others who can do that kind of work with us and who can hold us and support us through the mistakes we make. We slowly learn that other people are the resources we need the most when we are messing up the most. Relationships are not supposed to be the things that we pull ourselves back from and deprive our ourselves of when we are struggling they are the very resource that are going to help us out of that struggle if and when we don't have the answers we need for how to change on our own. We need to learn to trust in small increments and we need to learn to have good discernment about which people to surround ourselves with. This often happens over a period of years in the attachment and trauma healing process. The process of being honest with others and receiving feedback and being loved and held through our mistakes is one that we need to navigate the rest of our lives in a secure way because we will not ever in any version of reality be able to design a life in the future where we never again make a mistake. The best we can do is design a life where we are cared about and supported through our mistakes both internally and externally as much as is reasonable.

You may not have internalized if you grew up with Complex-PTSD that hope often comes about from a change in circumstances and that we can actually act our way into a better

inner world. When you do grow up with Complex-PTSD, one of the core traits is that you have learned helplessness because when you were a child you may have been truly powerless over the circumstances that you were in. You may have learned that there's no way to change your circumstances, that if you want to have a different feeling other than the feelings of frustration, anger, hopelessness, whatever it is that are a product of your environment you have to learn how to dissociate into a fantasy world where everything is perfect and nothing hurts. When we learn to regulate ourselves that way we can develop a huge blind spot around the fact that things like hope and happiness and love can be found in the world outside of us not just in the world that exists inside of our minds and imaginations.

You might chronically be experiencing between your inner world and your outer world but the idea is that as we go through the healing process of Complex-PTSD what we learn is that now as adults with much higher degrees of agency than we had as children we're now able to go out and interact with the world in a way that genuinely changes our inner emotional state as a true reflection of what's happening in our outer world, not because we are fantasizing about a different world.

Sometimes in our adult lives we're going to have to go after hope and optimism with a club and learn to proactively seek out environments and opportunities that will put more hope into our true reality. When we have more hope and opportunity in our lives our inner state begins to heal as an authentic response to what's going on around us not as a product of dissociating from it. This is essentially the process of learning to strengthen the relationship between your inner world and the outer world and how those two things interact with each other and can interact with each other in a way that is highly positive.

This takes some time to learn and deeply internalize and it's about slowly increasing our agency and our connecting abilities to the point where we learn that the world outside of our minds is actually a much better place to exist than the world inside of our minds because the world outside of our minds is a world that is real and that can offer us meaning in ways that our fantasy world could never properly give us. This becomes clearer and clearer the longer we walk down that path towards healing from Complex-PTSD.