

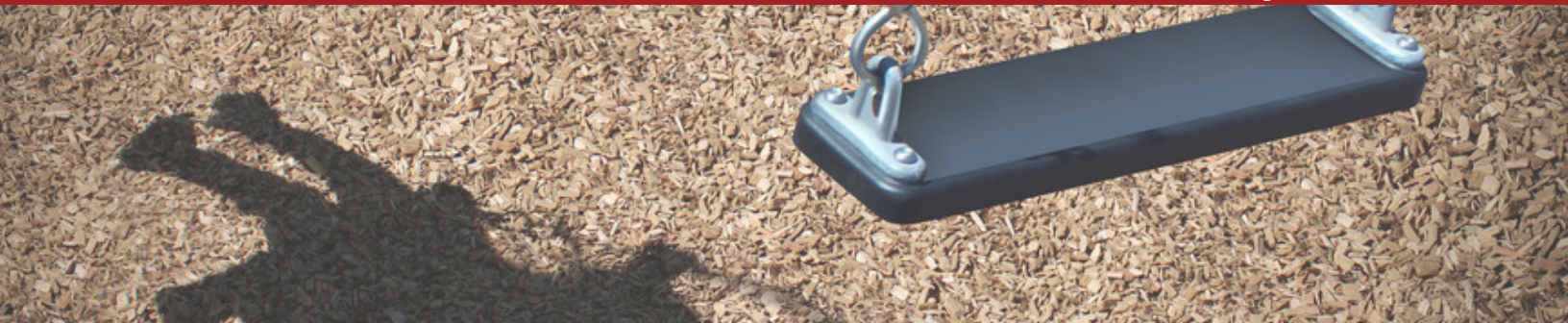


CHILD ABDUCTION T.I.P.S. NEWSLETTER

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Trauma Response in Children

by Cari Teran

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Humans possess primal biological responses that dictate how they behave when exposed to trauma. When posed with fear, particularly if the situation is perceived as life-threatening, human bodies respond in ways that are necessary for survival. These responses are referred to as fight, flight, freeze, and fawn. The first three responses (fight/flight/freeze) are familiar to many, as they are the primary responses we exhibit when faced with immediate danger.

The fawn response develops over time, within the context of a relationship that is unhealthy or abusive. An example of this is if a parent struggles with an untreated substance addiction, their behavior may be erratic, unpredictable and at times hostile. In response, the child caters to the parent in order to prevent or anticipate any emotional upsets. The child simultaneously ignores their own feelings of anxiety and distress, which causes them to learn that other people's emotions are more important than theirs. Ultimately, their feelings and needs are not met.

Fear sounds the alarms within the body. When confronted with what is perceived as immediate danger, the brain signals a release of two different chemicals. The first, adrenaline, increases blood flow to the heart and lungs and prepares enough oxygen for the body's muscles to use if the need arises to fight or run. The second, cortisol, stimulates the sugar/glucose metabolism and auto-immune response. These physiological responses help the body fight and run. Our heart rate increases, breathing becomes more shallow, digestion slows, and our muscles tense. If the danger is too overwhelming for our system, the human body can shut down or freeze.

Exposure to stress is a daily reality for many. Bodies respond to stress and bounce back appropriately if properly equipped throughout our childhood. Being provided with loving connections, proper tools, and safe environments during the early years of life promotes healthy recovery from stress.

When a child experiences chronic stress or traumatic events, their bodies tend to remain in a constant state of flight, flight, freeze, or fawn. This can contribute to difficulties in learning and development. It is necessary for the brain and body to rest in order to effectively process information and learn. Later in life, individuals may experience chronic health issues and problems in relationships at home and at work due to chronic activation of physiological states.

These natural responses to trauma are gifts that have helped the human species survive for thousands of years. However, when these trauma responses are activated excessively during the formative years of early life, and/or when exposure to trauma is chronic and ongoing, it can become difficult to shut off the fight, flight, freeze, and fawn mode.

It is important to recognize signs of trauma early and connect to mental health support. Here are ways that children may display different trauma responses:

Fight Response:

- Physically aggressive
- Verbally argumentative
- Blaming, defensive
- Demanding, controlling
- Non-compliant
- Oppositional, defiant
- Feelings of anger, irritability, fury, and rage

Flight Response:

- Hyperactive, fidgeting
- Restless
- Unfocused, preoccupied
- Procrastination/avoidance
- Feelings of anxiety, worry, fear, panic, and being overwhelmed

Freeze Response:

- Difficulty completing tasks
- Daydreams or mind goes blank
- Verbally unresponsive, saying "I don't know"
- Low energy
- Isolates from others
- Feelings of sadness, depression, hopelessness, bored, apathy, and shame

Fawn Response:

- People pleasing
- Focusing on others (not oneself)
- Easily exploited
- Prioritizes others needs over their own
- Difficulty saying "No" or setting boundaries
- Feelings of low self worth, guilt, shame, and easily embarrassed

Connection can be a wonderful start in repairing and regulating these stress responses. If a child is upset and you'd like to calm them down, there are 3 steps you can follow in order to do so:

1. Regulate: focus on soothing the child. Make them feel calm, safe, and loved. Should they need to expel excess energy, consider some ways in which they can go about it safely. Sometimes using all of the muscles in our body helps us sweat out the chemicals our body previously needed while fight/flight/freeze mode. When the child is ready, take deep breaths, watch something funny or soothing, and hug it out.
2. Relate: validate the child's feelings with your words and tone of voice. Enhance your connection by tuning into their needs in the moment and listening.
3. Reason: reflect, without judgment, and help the child identify how they felt and what they need. Make a plan for how to support your child next time this happens.

If the child is exhibiting some of the feelings and behaviors noted above please connect the child with mental health services.

For mental health services in your area please contact your medical insurance provider, Medi-Cal, county Department of Mental Health, or internet search engines for a therapist near you.

Mindfulness Meditation and Recognizing Trauma

by Jeff Takeda

Detective, Simi Valley Police Department

"Grace" was nine-years-old, a victim of a sexual assault by her mother's live-in boyfriend. I was conducting a forensic interview with her at our Multi-Disciplinary Center. The interview progressed to the most difficult part, in which we began talking about the actual abuse. I was treading carefully, doing the tricky balancing act of obtaining facts, clarifying information, avoiding leading questions, and most importantly keeping the well-being of Grace as the priority. As Grace was disclosing a particular detail of the abuse, I noticed a shift in her posture, she became fidgety. As I asked the next "tell me more" question, I noticed that she seemed pre-occupied and "checked out."

"Grace, would you like to take a little break?" She nodded her head. I looked over at the victim advocate who graciously and seamlessly moved in to her comfort role. We took a break and were able to get through the rest of the interview, obtaining a significant disclosure, while taking care to protect Grace's mental well-being and providing her support.

As a forensic interviewer or clinician, this scenario is likely very familiar to you. You have probably experienced it many times, picking up on sometimes subtle, other times more overt indicators of trauma. And of course, if we are honest with ourselves, we know there are times when we have not picked up on those cues, and perhaps ended up causing extra stress on our victim or client that could have been avoided.

What is the difference? It's having both the awareness and the presence of mind to pick up on those cues. This is accomplished by paying attention to the right things at the right moment and then making the right decision for the given situation. This is a skill set we can improve through training and that training is the practice of mindfulness meditation.

What is mindfulness meditation? It is simply training for your brain's attentional system, a training that over the past 20 years, modern science has helped show that it has real physical and mental health benefits, as well as positive affects on our attentional system and our cognitive performance.

Think for a moment about how much information we are presented with in a given moment via the five senses. For example, according to a study at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine the human retina is capable of transmitting visual input to the brain at a rate of about 10 million bits per second, and that is just visual information. And of course you are also taking in information via hearing, smell, taste, and touch.

The brain has an attentional system to manage all of this incoming data. If it didn't, you would become confused, even overwhelmed by all the incoming information. This attention system is critical to your functioning in the world, your cognitive ability, from basic survival to interacting with others to conducting a forensic interview or speaking with a client.

Meditation is simply training to help make this system more effective and efficient. It works by training your ability to focus and concentrate, your awareness of both the external and internal environment, and how you respond or react to experience.

"Mindfulness" is looking at an experience in a non-judgmental way, deferring your preferences, not conceptualizing or telling yourself a story about the experience. Just letting it be, seeing it in an un-entangled objective, almost 3rd person manner. Mindfulness meditation involves training the attentional system and using "mindfulness" or mindful awareness to regulate how you respond to experiences that arise during meditation.

So how does this training work and how can it help us when it comes to recognizing and responding to trauma skillfully with our clients? There's more to it, but essentially it works by training our focus and concentration and our awareness.

With a basic focus practice, we establish an “anchor” to focus our attention on. It is usually a neutral present moment experience like the sensation of breathing. We place our attention on this anchor, and when the mind wanders away from it, we gently bring the attention back to the anchor. The mind wanders again, we bring it back, and begin again. Each time we bring the attention back to the anchor, the thing we are deciding to pay attention to on-purpose, we are strengthening our focus and concentration, our ability to stay focused on something despite other things (thoughts, feelings, emotions, sounds, impulses) that are competing for our attention. What’s important here, is that we don’t discard or push away those things, we acknowledge them, and see them clearly or mindfully, and then let them go for the moment, and return to our anchor or focus.

This simple practice of returning to the anchor can do a number of things that can help us in recognizing trauma. When you are speaking with a client or interviewing a victim, that person becomes your “anchor.” You maintain your attention on them and when something else pulls your attention away, you are more apt to notice it and bring the focus back to your client. The increased focus on your client increases the chances you will notice changes to their baseline behavior, just like in my example with “Grace.”

How To Meditate

Let’s start with this simple breathing-focused practice. Start with just five minutes.

1. Set a timer, so you don't have to keep looking at your watch.
2. Sit in a chair in a relaxed, but alert position, with your spine as upright and straight as possible.
3. Place your hands on your knees or fold them in your lap.
4. You can keep your eye open or close them. If you keep the eyes open, soften the gaze, without focusing on anything in particular and taking in the whole visual plane.
5. Focus the attention on the physical sensation of breathing, not changing or controlling the breath, just feeling it. The breath is our focus or the "anchor", the thing we decide to pay attention to on purpose. When the mind wanders away, with a thought, feeling, or emotion, gently let it go, and gently direct the attention back to the breath and begin again. Over and over.
6. The attention will wander over and over. It's not a problem, just re-direct the attention back to the breath.

Try this practice every day for a couple of weeks, and see how you feel. If you can, try to get your time up to at least 12 minutes per session. The most recent science says that a minimum of 12 minutes per day is just enough training to start seeing significant positive changes in the brain. The more time the better. It is also helpful to meditate at the same time and in the same place every day. Having a regular “meditation spot” is helpful in cueing your mind that it’s time to meditate and help you get settled in and focused more easily.

Meditation practice really helped me in both my professional and personal life. It not only has made me better at my job but also made me less of a jerk around the people that matter most to me. I can say without exaggeration that it changed my life for the better. But don’t take my word for it, just try it yourself and see if it works for you.

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