

Emotional *Toxicity*

By Cheryl Yanuck, MD

“You idiot, how could you be so dumb!?” Verbal abuse such as this can have profoundly negative effects on children’s self esteem that can endure into adulthood. Children need positive feedback and encouragement to develop into confident adults.

When I work with patients who were repeatedly criticized and belittled, we identify the negative beliefs they absorbed. These messages often feel like tapes of the critical family member in their head, though the messages can also feel like their own voices, having been fully internalized. We also identify the mature, loving parts of themselves that can help the wounded parts let go of negative messages and the shame and other emotions that accompany them. This approach is based on a variety of “inner child” forms of psychotherapy, such as the Developmental Needs Meeting Strategy (DNMS) developed by Shirley Jean Schmidt, and others.

RESPONDING TO ABUSE

Sometimes caregivers become violent, leaving patients feeling hurt both physically and emotionally. Physical abuse requires immediate intervention. By law, doctors and others are required to report child and elder abuse to the state. Survivors of physical abuse can benefit from DNMS and also from Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), a technique developed by Francine Shapiro to help victims overcome their traumatic experiences. After developing internal resources that make therapy more tolerable, the patient allows images and memories of the event to pass through their mind in short intervals, checking in with the therapist frequently. While this is happening, the patient has some type of bilateral stimulation going on: tapping, watching the therapist’s finger move back and forth, listening to a tone that switches ears, etc. The goal is to work through the trauma in manageable chunks, to get relief from symptoms associated with the memory. EMDR often works more quickly than other forms of therapy and can provide more gut-level emotional change than more cerebral types of therapy. I believe that the bilateral stimulation brings out parts of the memory that are stored outside the cerebral cortex in the deeper, more primitive parts of the brain, allowing emotions and physical sensations to be processed through and released.



Dr. Cheryl Yanuck

SEXUAL ABUSE

“Uncle Joe loves you, come sit on his lap; this is our special way of playing. We don’t have to let anyone know.” Sexual abuse is often the most damaging type of abuse. It can be violent, but is often seductive, and thus its effects are more insidious. When a trusted adult crosses the line sexually with a child or adolescent, the victim’s sense of self often becomes damaged. With chronic abuse, a person’s psyche can even split into the part that experiences the abuse and the part that pretends it’s not happening; this is called dissociation. Some doctors fail to recognize when this is happening and try to medicate it away. The proper treatment is to develop a safe environment in therapy and inside the patient’s mind for the untold story to be gradually revealed.

DNMS and EMDR can be very helpful to survivors of sexual abuse. It may take longer to develop the internal resources that are an essential part of both techniques in someone who was chronically abused. The experience of building resources and exploring resistances in a safe environment is essential to healing.

EXTERNAL TOXINS WITH INTERNAL IMPACT

Toxicity enters into psychiatric practice in other ways as well: substance abuse, side effects of medications, environmental toxins, hormone imbalances, and other physical factors can all manifest as mental disorders. When evaluating a new patient, I always consider these medical issues when deciding on the best treatment. If someone suffers from hypothyroidism, their depression will not respond well to psychotherapy or even to antidepressants. They need an evaluation of why their thyroid is under-functioning and will probably need thyroid hormone replacement. Drinking alcohol exces-

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sively can cause mood swings, sleep disturbance, impaired judgment, and difficulties in relationships and functioning. Many prescription drugs can cause mood disturbances, including birth control pills, blood pressure and asthma medicines, steroids, and many others. Environmental toxins that can manifest psychiatrically include lead, mercury, and other heavy metals. It is important to diagnose medical issues that effect mental health so the best treatment can be implemented. **HH**

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