



THE VICTIM'S SAFETY AND WELL-BEING TAKE PRIORITY IN ALL MATTERS

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Human trafficking can have a profound and prolonged negative impact on victims. Many trafficking victims experience repeated traumatic events over time. The compounded nature of trauma in human trafficking can have a significant physical, social, and mental impact on its victims. The need to effectively address this trauma is a critical component of effective victim service delivery.

Overview

Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that create physically and emotionally harmful or threatening experiences. The adverse effects of trauma may occur immediately or over time. They may affect an individual's mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Victims of human trafficking often experience high levels—and multiple layers—of physical and psychological trauma, involving emotional or mental distress.

Complex Trauma

Complex trauma may result from exposure to multiple traumatic events over time. Victims of human trafficking often have a long history of complex trauma and polyvictimization, enduring exposure to multiple and varied traumatic events, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying, exposure to violence, and more. Research shows the impact of complex trauma is more damaging to an individual than multiple events of a single type of victimization.

Effects of Trauma

Human trafficking victims experience complex physical and emotional trauma, and the effects can be persistent and devastating. Effects may occur immediately or have a delayed onset. The duration may be short- or long-term. In some situations, an individual may not recognize the connection between the traumatic events experienced during trafficking and the effects. Victims of human trafficking may experience challenges coping with stresses of daily life, maintaining relationships, managing cognitive processes (e.g., memory, attention), regulating behavior, and controlling emotions. Victims of human trafficking may also

suffer from anxiety, depression, panic disorder, substance abuse, eating disorders, and Post-Traumatic Stress. Symptoms of trauma reported by trafficking victims include—

- Depression, hopelessness, feelings of sadness and unhappiness, sudden or inexplicable crying.
- Loss of interest in things and/or inability to plan for the future.
- Stress-related disorders, avoidance, disorientation, confusion, anxiety, phobias, and panic attacks.
- Sleeplessness, sleep disturbances, nightmares, and/or insomnia.
- Denial, memory loss, difficulty concentrating.
- Anger, aggression, irritability, mood changes.
- Changes in appetite or eating patterns, eating disorders.
- Exhaustion and constant fatigue.
- Isolating behavior.
- Guilt, shame, and/or self-blame.
- Fear of being alone, distrust, and fear of strangers.
- Recurrent or intrusive memories of abuse.
- Feeling inferior to others, feeling of being permanently damaged, fear of rejection.
- Sexual problems, including lack of sexual desires or oversexualized behaviors.
- Obsessions or compulsions.
- Hallucinations or delusions.
- Somatization/psychosomatic symptoms.
- Self-harm and suicidal ideation.
- Trauma bonds and attachment issues, such as Stockholm Syndrome.

The Importance of Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-informed care creates opportunities to rebuild a survivor’s sense of empowerment by prioritizing restoring the survivor’s feelings of safety, choice, and control.¹ Trauma-informed care recognizes and addresses the vulnerabilities resulting from the trauma experienced, including the physical, social, and emotional impact of trauma. An organization can apply trauma-informed care principles to its policies, procedures, practices, and settings to better meet victims’ service needs.

¹ Please refer to the *Trauma-Informed Care Resources* document available from the Center for more information.

