

What is trauma?

When we hear about “trauma”, there are a few different types or understandings of trauma we could be talking about.

Trauma, a holistic understanding.

Sabella Kngwarraye Turner, Central Arrernte women, reminds us that everything comes from alhele itethe: living ground. She defines trauma as:

Utnenge Kwarneme Atnyeneme: hurt held in the spirit.

She explains that the origin of trauma is being ‘spun away’ from the things that come from the living ground: culture, Country, language, kinship, stories, clear thinking, good feelings, good friends and strong bodies. When all of this is connected and held properly, we have *utnenge rletterke*: strong spirit. When we are spun away from any of these things, our spirits feel the pain of *Anpernirrentye Ultakeme*: kinship broken. This is trauma.

Trauma affects the way children and young people think and act and overwhelms their ability to cope and engage. It can affect a person for many decades and in many different ways. Common symptoms include fear and anxiety, difficulty with relationships, impulsive behaviour, feeling sad and hopeless, tired and confused¹.

Research has shown that people are not only affected by traumatic events they directly experience. Witnessing or hearing about trauma from a family or community member can also have an impact. Unresolved trauma contributes to many of the social and health problems affecting Aboriginal communities. If people have not had the opportunity to heal, they may act out their pain in negative ways including physical or emotional violence, abuse or addiction.

Healing Foundation, Glossary of healing terms:
https://healingfoundation.org.au/app/uploads/2020/07/HF_Glossary_of_Healing_Terms_A3_Poster_Jul2020_V1.pdf



Trauma by type.

Single-incident trauma

This is like a dog bite, a car accident, or witnessing something terrifying, where that one incident causes psychological harm and continues to impact your life, even if it happened long ago. Someone who's experienced this trauma might avoid all dogs, or decide they don't want to learn to drive, and it can impact their life in increasingly severe and disconnected ways.

Complex trauma

A repeated pattern of traumatic events happening over time. Most children in out-of-home care have experienced complex trauma as relational trauma, in the context of a close relationship, where an adult who should protect the child instead abuses or neglects them. Relational trauma involves an adult significantly betraying the child's trust, which impacts their brain's ability to form trusting relationships and feel safe.

Developmental trauma

When traumatic events impact how the brain develops. Children are more vulnerable to developmental trauma the younger they are because brains are developing rapidly at this time, forming all the connections that are needed for their growth and development. Often, developmental trauma occurs in infancy or before birth. If a baby is regularly left hungry with a dirty nappy or is exposed to family violence or substance abuse before they're born, their brain fills with cortisol, the toxic stress chemicals that can put the baby in a permanent state of stress, and physically change how their brain makes connections.

While the other types of trauma hurt us as individuals, intergenerational trauma affects whole populations, communities, families, and individuals, and is passed down through generations to children, grandchildren, and further. It is a trauma which can overwhelm the ability of individuals, families, and whole communities to cope in mind, body, and spirit. Intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal people in Australia is steeped in the long-lasting impacts of colonisation and the ongoing systemic discrimination and racism many Aboriginal individuals, families, and communities experience.

