

UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOURS

CHILDREN: WHAT IS NORMAL?

- Challenging behaviour, "acting out", sulking, whinging, yelling or misbehaviour are often the first indication children have an unmet need or it may relate to their 'attachment style' and your approach.
- First think to yourself - are their basic needs being met? Could they be hungry, thirsty, tired, cold, in pain or are they feeling bored and neglected - do they need genuine attention and engagement, conversation, emotional support, fresh air, exercise, a quiet activity or positive praise?
- Experiencing a range of emotions throughout childhood is healthy and normal.
- Feeling helpless and out of control is not and may create anxiety and other emerging mental health issues as they grow.
- Childhood experiences establish emotional regulation and resilience later in life - learning to understand, process, manage and regulate our emotions in early childhood is the first step in getting the most out of life and relationships.
- For a child to experience risk (within reason) is how they develop their pre-frontal cortex (which regulates risk, safety, planning etc)
- Emotions are distinctive sets of body sensations which we all experience under specific situations. The four basic emotions are anger, sadness, fear and joy (and thousands of combination in-between) and they all serve a "life protecting" role in our character and interactions with others.
- A growing child has to learn how to deal with feelings socially, and find constructive outlets for the powerful energy feelings create.
- Anger is what makes us stand up for ourselves to instinctively self-preserve our freedom and choices; Fear keeps us safe and cautious of danger;
- Sadness helps us grieve, release pent up pain and move on with life; and realise what and who we value in life to stay connected with people and the world. All outcomes are directed towards maintaining contentment, joy and happiness.
- It's all about balance - you can teach kids how to understand, express and handle their emotions.
- Encourage kids to use words to express their anger and connect with their feelings so they can describe them without feeling violent or out of control.
- Tantrums often indicate both parent and child are living under too much stress - recognise that certain situations are frustrating and can stretch our energy and patience; and do what you can to minimise such pressures. Can you simplify outings and plans for the day and allow some time just to be or spend some relaxed time together to rest and recharge?
- Don't forget after school - where kids have been socialising, learning, following instructions and running around all day - they may first need to just chill and sit for a moment to unwind when they get home - try not to throw a heap of demands and orders and activities on them daily as soon as they step in the door.
- Home is meant to be a safe space (assuming it is free of threatening danger or abuse) - it should be an environment we can all
- "remove our public mask", unwind, relax and be a little more expressive to release any tension - the key is to find ways to do this safely, respectfully and with calm support and a hug if need be, free of shaming and aggravating other behaviour and reactions.
- What we need is kids who can move through the many feelings life brings - joy is the goal - but being comfortable with all the emotions is the way to get there most often.



BEING TRAUMA-INFORMED: HOW THE BRAIN REWIRES TO COPE

- Did you know our brains re-wire to cope with high levels of stress, abuse, anger, fear, violence? When perceiving a threat, the body and brain transform to defend and protect itself as a coping mechanism - becoming hyper-vigilant means the brain doesn't distinguish between 'perceived threat' and 'actual threat'. This shapes the neural pathways and behaviours in people and how they respond to stress, conflict, challenges and rise to overcome them.
- Many adults struggling with mental health challenges often experienced trauma as a child and it has influenced their behaviour and how they respond to things in adult life.
- Trauma affects how people's brains develop. Unprocessed childhood trauma = traumatised adults.
- Traumatic experiences are common and the effects can be profound.
- Increased stress hormone, cortisol causes an overload of flight or fight hormones in children which can render them ineffective in the future or shut off parts of the brain which regulate emotion, language development and decision making. Distress is a reaction to environmental stimuli.
- Yelling, hitting, shaming, violence, neglect, prolonged negativity through tone and expression, and abuse have long lasting damaging effects to a developing brain.
- Chronic trauma, like hunger, poverty, abuse or neglect, can harm children's brain development. The effects of toxic stress can be lifelong, increasing the risk of chronic illness like heart disease and depression. It changes the parts of the brain that control how we react and respond.
- It changes how we handle stress, how we interact with other people, and how much insight and compassion we have.
- 75 % of Australians are exposed to at least one traumatic event in their lifetime: Individual trauma results from an event, or a series of events experienced by an individual which may have been physically and/or emotionally harmful or life threatening; and has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual wellbeing.
- Emotional effects of trauma may include anxiety, fear, guilt, grief, depression, sadness, feeling lost, feeling isolated, worry about others, anger, irritability, feeling numb, startled, shocked, feeling abandoned, avoidance, change in mood and cognition, 'people pleasing' and perfectionism.
- Childhood trauma is usually complex trauma, and unlike 'single incident' trauma, it is cumulative, underlying; and interpersonally generated.
- Adaptive responses to childhood distress, fear or trauma may cause fight, flight, freeze, fawn (appease) responses; avoidance, hyperarousal, sense of threat, emotional dysregulation, negative self-concept with an ongoing sense of being worthless and defeat, as well as extreme feelings of shame and guilt; disturbance in relationships and ongoing difficulties in forming and sustaining relationships and connection.
- Health disparities, substance abuse, and mental illness are all commonly linked to experiences of historical trauma
- If childhood trauma remains unprocessed, it can impact on a person's ability to parent - causing multigenerational impacts.
- Self-harm and substance use and addiction can often become an individual's coping strategy to manage, express or release intense emotional pain, difficult feelings, thoughts and memories associated with complex trauma.

UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOURS

BE KIND, TOLERANT AND UNDERSTANDING

- With all this in mind, it's important for us to demonstrate a little more understanding, patience, kindness, and care in the world.
- We need a society that is trauma-informed and a world where we can all begin to heal; be more compassionate and understanding to see how problems have shaped a person, instead of trying to "fix" behaviours.
- You never know the journey someone has walked in their life or their week or their day before you bump into them that day.
- How we respond and treat people can have profound effects and when people and children of all ages feel misunderstood or undervalued or not heard and acknowledged, this breeds problems.
- Everyone is going through battles, pressures, worries and struggles and people may have different triggers and stressors.
- You never know what someone is going through, has survived, how their day started or a devastating event which has recently happened.
- Sometimes you need to understand one's journey or the load they're lifting to see why they act in such a way.
- Unfavourable behaviour stems from certain experiences, vulnerabilities, triggers, traumas, and unprocessed feelings.
- The most emotionally resilient amongst us have often received stable and caring love and support from a close base of family and/or friends, feel part of their community and have developed coping strategies and forms of self-care to help tackle life head on and get the most out of it. They have found ways of healing whether through lifestyle factors or professional support and understand their personality style.
- When we feel strong and happy and content, we are also better placed to help others in need. When our 'cup' is not overflowing, we have capacity to lend a hand to others who might need support. This also creates an unselfish world.
- Asking for help is THE strongest thing we can do- it is NOT a weakness!
- Misplaced anger or misdirected sadness is often symptomatic of something else.
- It's important to speak up for help and to reach out to others.
- Don't let your 'cup' get so full you can't take time out for you to reflect, heal and recharge or have spare energy and time to listen genuinely to others in need.
- Speak to someone you trust, seek help and access as much advice and self-care tips as you can.
- Be kind to yourself. Be grateful. Be forgiving. Be patient. Be giving. Be understanding. Have hope. Be brave. Stay positive. Smile.
- Remember, we all have bad days, different personalities, unique journeys, default natural settings, and various ways of working.
- Some people and situations don't bring out the best in us; they can highlight our flaws and create insecurity. Either find learned ways to overcome these and learn to understand one another's perspectives; or you may discover in some situations it might be healthier for all to walk away and find your own tribe - people that bring out the best in you in an environment leaves you flourishing and fulfilled.
- Surround your self with people who make you feel good - participate in activities that make you feel good and contribute to people less fortunate than you in society - they have walked a journey many of us may never completely fully appreciate or understand.
- Kids - it's ok to make mistakes as long as you can learn from them. They can not define you forever. If you are committed to moving forward, learning new coping strategies and social skills, then past behaviour and mistakes won't ever define you - your best self and strengths will.



HEALING FROM TRAUMA

- Unhealed trauma impacts every aspect of our lives.
- It's important as an adult to be self-aware and reflect on whether you have unhealed trauma.
- Unprocessed trauma can present in different ways - exaggerated and defensive behaviours, mood swings, violence, excessive anger, substance use and abuse, self harm and depression (or feeling numb and unmotivated, lacking a 'zest' for life).
- Best support you can offer yourself or others is to validate the experience, seek assistance, speak up, and restore hope.
- Best outcome for overcoming trauma is: First days and weeks experiencing strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt, anger, or grief. Followed by making sense of what has happened with feelings usually beginning to subside. Many recover quite quickly with support of family and friends.
- How can you support someone when trauma responses are overwhelming their lives and behaviours? Acknowledge how they feel, provide choices, recognise their strengths and support their goals and dreams.
- Recognise you're not alone; there is support and help out there; a recovery journey is possible - you can have a productive and fulfilling life.
- Sharing your problems (whether you're a child or an adult) with someone really helps, so chat to a trusted person in your life that you feel safe talking to. Talk to a parent, caregiver, family member, friend or friend's parent, teacher, coach, colleague, your doctor, a mental health professional or psychologist, student counsellor or mentor, your Employee Assistance Programs (at work), or community support groups.
- You can access support for coping better by checking out the extensive resources at: mentalhealthweek.org.au/support
- Seeking professional counselling may be advised, talking to loved ones will help; and you can also adopt self-soothing strategies, which may include: breathing techniques; positive visualisation, affirmations, and self-talk; learning to regulate emotional responses.
- If you have experienced trauma, you may be vulnerable to "triggers" which are experiences or interactions which bring up the emotion of the traumatic event or memory.
- A good idea for overcoming triggers is to practice relaxation techniques, cognitive awareness and mindfulness or you can prepare a "feel good box" of items (or a digital list of items you can access) which are meaningful to you and provide safe and self-soothing sensory experiences. You wish to include items that activate a number of or all of the senses:
- Sight - items you can look at such as photos, picture books, paintings. Sounds - links to your favourite songs and soothing nature sounds
- Taste - your favourite treats and tastes. Touch - fabrics that feel soothing to touch, blankets, cuddly toys, squishy stress balls
- Smells - which evoke positive or nostalgic emotions with essential oils, scented candles, favourite perfumes or soaps.
- Activities - add your favourite book, a pencil and paper, mindful colouring sheets, cross words, crafts or puzzles.
- Trauma-informed training can be very useful for mental health services and members of the general public trying to make sense of the world and all its moving parts.