

## How Traumatized Children Express Sadness, Fear and Hopelessness

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Understanding troubled young people is half the challenge if we want to help them. Experienced helpers know that this is much easier said than done. Troubled young people often do all they can to keep adults guessing, they often work against their own best interests and they generally disguise what is really going on for one primary reason—to avoid vulnerability. Children do not come into this world with anxiety and mental health struggles. It is true that some problems have genetic factors, but the human brain has an amazing ability to adapt, and it seeks to overcome any deficiencies it may encounter. The reason young people struggle is not primarily nature (genetic loading) but nurture or what happens in the environment they are born into. Unfortunately, too many children encounter an environment not well suited to promote their success in life. Issues such as a child trying to raise a child, substance abuse, poverty, domestic violence and child abuse and neglect are the most common issues that most troubled young people share concerning their early lives. There is sufficient research over the last twenty years to fully explain why these adverse childhood experiences produce young people with mental, emotional and behavioral disorders. And these are the majority of children who need our help.

All individuals are unique, but troubled children often share a common past, it is how they respond to their past that is unique. We must realize that even if two children have the same experience, the results can be very different. Trauma is actually less about what has happened and more about what happens inside the individual. This is because how someone perceives an event will usually determine its meaning and its impact. As helpers we must never assume that we know the meaning of trauma to an individual and instead take the time to learn how the young person views what has happened and the resulting response. In the context of this article trauma is any event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. Serious events may not cause trauma with some individuals, while a minor event can be very impactful on others. Trauma is an internal experience rather than an external event.

We once viewed post-traumatic stress as something mainly associated with soldiers and wartime or what used to be called "shell shock syndrome." However, the condition is now much more associated with non-military individuals who have gone through one or a series of experiences that significantly affected the individual's ability to manage an event. Children are a classic example of how psychology now views trauma. Children must rely on adults for their very survival. When adults become threats rather than nurturers, then the child must go into self-protective survival mode. Most children lack the emotional or behavioral ability to protect themselves, and threatening events can be experienced as a risk to their survival. The brain and autonomic nervous system are prepared with a fight or flight built-in response to survival threats. However, activating this primitive brain system does not come without a cost. The results of traumatic events come on a continuum from minor to life changing impacts.

There are far too many negative impacts of trauma to cover here but the most typical and impactful results of trauma will be mentioned. Trauma has a major impact on the brain. After the individual's brain has experienced an event it could not cope with, a trauma memory is seared into the limbic brain in order to ensure any similar situation is to be avoided at all cost. The primary impact of this is not just avoiding similar serious events, but all new sensory information will now be processed through the brain's limbic trauma memory. This is why a soldier may leave the war-zone but the war-zone does not leave the soldier's brain. For children, trauma has a major negative impact on self-regulation and the ability to manage strong emotions. Trauma changes perceptions of situations with the primary goal of finding any potential threats. Traumatized individuals also struggle with interpersonal relationship and often misperceive the intentions and motivations of others. These and many other results of trauma can drastically impair an individual's ability to manage life's challenges and struggles.

It was important to briefly mention what trauma does in order to return to our current topic, how children express strong negative emotions. The impact of trauma on emotions and perceptions puts a young person in the difficult position of first--not knowing what they are feeling, and second--what to do about such emotions. There are a few emotions that come quite naturally. These emotions include the big three--fear, anger/rage and frustration. However, the difficulty is these surface emotions often mask the real feelings under the surface. For example, if a young person expects something good to happen and plans change, they express anger when they are actually saddened by the change. However, because of the negative disposition of the limbic brain, the surface emotions take precedent and the young person lacks the insight to find the underlying primary emotion. The result is that most traumatized young people lack the internal understanding of emotions, much less the ability to effectively express emotions.

To understand challenging young people, we must take the time to climb inside of their world since they struggle to understand our world. To do this, answer the question what are the most unpleasant emotions you experience? For most people the big three negative emotions--fear, anger/rage and frustration top the list. Most of us do our best to avoid situations that will result in these experiences. Avoidance is a major strategy for everyone, and it is generally effective. Therefore, it is not a surprise that troubled young people use avoidance as a major method to cope. Young people avoid people, places and things that they anticipate will result in unpleasant emotions. To list of few things they may often avoid includes: school, difficult tasks, physical and/or mental challenges, unfamiliar places or activities, and adults who have expectations of them.

The most difficult emotions for these young people are the deeper feelings under the surface. With this background, including the probability that the young person is actually unaware what they are actually feeling, we can now directly cover how troubled young people express unpleasant emotions:

Sadness – A pervasive emotion for young people after trauma is sadness. It is not difficult to understand why. The difference between what a young person deserves and what they often

receive would produce a level of sadness in a normal healthy individual, and after trauma these young people are neither normal or healthy. Sadness is often what is called an emotional set point, meaning that sadness is a default mode for these individuals. Therefore, sadness is not only a frequent emotion, but it is pervasive. To make matters worse, sadness is a passive emotion. This means that it is something the individual usually experiences alone and is often brought on by either another person or a situation where the individual feels like a victim of the situation. Someone's home burns to the ground in a wild fire and the expected feeling would be sadness. When someone loses a pet or a loved one, the expected emotion is sadness. Because of the passive nature of sadness, it makes individuals vulnerable to the situation or other people. The last thing a traumatized young person wants is to be vulnerable. Therefore, sadness will most often be expressed by an active emotion—anger or rage. After trauma, young people do not want to be the victim of other people or of situations. An automatic response to avoid vulnerability is to express the active emotion of anger with the situation. Anger is an emotion we can express in a direct and powerful way and is very different than feeling vulnerable. It is often a good idea when a troubled young person is angry to consider if the underlying deeper issue is some level of sadness.

This is not to say that troubled young people are unable to express sadness. In fact, some individuals after trauma get stuck in chronic sadness and develop a passive negative emotional set point that has been recognized in diagnostic mental health conditions such as dysthymia and depression. Whether you are working with a troubled youth who is stuck in anger or sadness, there may be more similarities than differences in the two negative emotional states.

Fear – After trauma, fear can become a pervasive emotional state. Since trauma resets the brain around perceived or actual threats, fear is not only a common emotional state, it is an expected state. It would be unusual that after trauma for the individual not to have heightened levels of fear. However, fear places the youth in one of the most vulnerable states there is. Even when the individual may be experiencing fear, the brain may try to avoid vulnerability in the only way possible and that is to block the experience or some level of dissociation. Blocking the experience of fear can result in physical, mental or a combination of states. Dissociation can be expressed on a continuum, and can range from daydreaming and not paying attention, to fainting or being unresponsive. Fear can also be expressed as excessive compliance. It is never a good thing for a troubled young person to follow every direction and rule, in such cases the odds are good that the child is experiencing fear brought on by a perceived threat that is being expressed by doing exactly as the threatening person is expecting. It may sound odd to some adults but some resistance is actually healthy because the individual is injecting themselves into the situation by having an opinion or a preference. Fear is the only emotion that is less desirable than sadness, and may be expressed in active (fight responses) or passive (flight responses). It can be difficult to determine if fear is the underlying primary emotional state, but it should be considered as a possibility.

Hopelessness – The feeling of being hopeful or not is primarily about the future in relation to the past and present. Many troubled young people experience a lack of either future orientation or hope for the future, and can we blame them? When a child has not received the care and consideration they deserve growing up, why would we expect them to think the future will be different? After all, many young children do not realize that abuse and neglect are not what life should be like, it is the only experience they have. To lack hope drains the individual of what motivates most people—anticipation, confidence and optimism for what lies ahead. Because many young people know only the connection of living equaling pain, hopelessness can be the primary emotional state they experience. This would lead most any individual to a host of negative emotions and behaviors. Hopelessness can result in lethargy or anger. It can also result in responses on a continuum between lack of interest in most everything, to extreme risk taking and self-harm. When a young person is acting in ways that work against their own interests and well-being, it would be wise to consider if there is an underlying emotional state of hopelessness.

With internal pervasive negative emotions prompted by trauma and a desire to avoid vulnerability at all costs, the result is often strong emotional expression as far from the primary affective state as possible. The most common results are some of the easiest emotions to express that do not signal vulnerability to others. Such easy to express emotions include—frustration, irritation and being generally grumpy and cranky. These emotional states will be very familiar to anyone who spends much time around troubled young people. These are go-to feelings, letting others know that the young person is not liking what is going on but responding with an active rather than passive response in order not to reflect powerlessness and vulnerability.

So far what we have not covered is what to do about pervasive negativity and concealed internal feeling states. This is in part because the primary goal of this article is to help parents and helpers better understand the inner emotional life of traumatized and troubled young people. However, a few suggestions will be offered to those who try to help or live with a classically negative young person.

The first thing to realize is that as unpleasant as it is for you to be around some of these young people, consider what it must be like for them. The young person must live full time in the negative world they perceive. With some understanding of how their past has clouded their present and their future, it can help us have compassion for living with the brain that has been sculpted by trauma.

When we understand what the world looks like through the eyes of a troubled young person, it is important to reflect this in how we engage with these children. Do we return negative for negative? Do we reflect frustration and irritation in our interactions? If so, how are we any different than they are? The only positive direction that is possible is to disconfirm the young person's fatalistic belief that life is a continual series of hardship and pain. We must show them that it is possible to take command of our perceptions and emotions. When we are faced with a reactive and negative individual, we have the ability to determine what we feel and are not controlled by what is outside of us.

What we all want for these young people is to have a chance to have a life that includes meaning, enjoyment and contentment, in other words something very different than their everyday experience. The strongest teaching tool is modeling. It may not be apparent to you that you are having a strong influence on the young person, but it is likely that you are. How you are influencing the child toward a positive or negative direction depends on whether your interactions result in you being either positive or negative. It is perfectly understandable if you find yourself being irritated and frustrated by the negativity and nonsense that you experience from a challenging young person. It may be understandable, but it is not helpful to reach your goal of having a positive influence. There is a parallel process when you face a negative individual while staying positive and this shows the young person that they have the ability to find positive aspects of a world their experience as primarily negative.

Please keep in mind that trauma does not go away or even improve over time. For most young people, outside help is highly recommended and generally this involves professional help. Finding an experienced therapist who understands how to mitigate the impacts of trauma is a wise idea. You should never be the only part of a positive plan for a troubled young person. But do not underestimate the impact you can have in your interactions. There is nothing easy or quick about making a positive impact. It is a bit like being a farmer when you plant the seeds of a positive life, then nurture these seeds, but you may not be around by the time they bear fruit. But even if you believe you have been unable to turn around a young person, the process can teach you a lot about being a caring and optimistic person. After all, only an optimist could believe that this young person will someday be a successful and happy individual, right? Do your best, bounce back when you make mistakes, and remember the young person is watching and learning from you even when you don't think this is happening. And one last thing--reflect the emotions and behaviors you want for the young person in the future. If you can do this then everyone wins!