

Paras: Today we are going to have a quick conversation on one of the things that most often comes to me in therapy, and is also the subject of quite a few memes. So let's just get right into it.

One of the questions that I get asked most often, as a therapist, is: "Has my childhood screwed me up for life?" "Have I been scarred for life by my childhood?" So let's talk a little bit about childhood trauma.

So, one of the things that you need to know about childhood trauma is that most kinds of traumas that one experiences during childhood; whether they are physical abuse, whether they are emotional abuse, whether they are sexual abuse, lead to what is called as "traumas of attachment" or "early relational traumas".

Now, what attachment traumas or "traumas of attachment" really basically mean is that there is disturbance in the attachment pattern between a child and their primary caregivers. Now a primary caregiver is basically a parent, or any responsible adult who is charged with caring for you. So, even if you didn't grow up and were not taken care of by your biological parents, then any caregiver qualifies as a caregiver or as somebody who is considered as an early source of care and emotional support. So, that's what the basic definition is.

This has been a topic of curiosity in psychology for a long period of time and there is an entire discipline of psychology called developmental psychology, which studies normal and what is called as abnormal development. So there are a lot of theorists, right from the time of Freud to—You have Adler, Erikson, Piaget and many other theorists who have opined about normal development and what are the consequences if there is any deviation from that path when it comes to normal development.

So, in this brief conversation, I'm just going to talk about two quick factors; one is childhood and the other is resilience. Because, while a lot of us may have unfortunately experienced trauma in childhood, there is also tremendous resilience that children possess and quite often, while one cannot cancel the other out—nothing's going to take away the experience of the fact that you underwent trauma—it gives you the tools, it gives you the protective factors that equip you to cope with trauma and move on in life.

So, let's first answer the question in a yes or no format. Has your childhood screwed you up for life? Is this a life sentence? Are you never going to be whole again? NO. That's absolutely not true. Childhood trauma definitely does have far-reaching and long-lasting effects, but, by no means does it mean that you are a broken person, you are an emotionally stunted person, you will never be a person who will lead a fulfilling and satisfying life. None of these things are true.

So, I think that's one of the things that we need to understand when it comes to childhood traumas.

Now like I said, traumas of attachment during childhood can happen both by commission or by omission. What that means is basically, it can happen because of something that a caregiver did to you or it can happen because of something that they failed to do, like neglect for example. So harsh words, beatings, or any kind of ill-treatment—whether it is physical, emotional, sexual—from your parents while growing up does obviously count as childhood trauma but so does neglect. Your parent not being there, you constantly being worried that your parent will leave or abandon or be hurt in some way and not make it back safely, or you actually being abandoned and ignored and neglected by your parent for large periods of time are also attachment related traumas. Of course, there are a lot of issues that are theoretically said to emanate from this later on in adulthood.

Now, one of the stereotypes is the idea of "daddy issues" and it is quite often negatively used in the context of women. But I want to tell you very clearly that childhood trauma is something that affects persons of all genders and it's not that your gender identity makes you more resilient or more immune to childhood traumas. So, does this affect cis men? Absolutely, it does. It's something that needs to be talked about and isn't talked about enough. So that's just a stereotype, that's just a myth. I just wanted to tell you about that.

Now, one of the landmark studies on childhood trauma is called as the ACEs study. ACEs is spelled as A-C-E and it stands for "Adverse Childhood Events". So the ACEs study was basically a study which was done in the United States of America—in the late 1980s, if I'm not mistaken—and the results of it were published somewhere in the early 90s. And basically the ACEs study looked at the link between childhood trauma and chronic health conditions, and social & emotional problems that people may develop later on in adulthood.

So, they looked at a bunch of things really. They looked at the connection between childhood traumas and stuff like heart disease, stuff like cancer—of course, mental illness like depression; or even the likelihood of becoming a perpetrator of violence or being the survivor of violence later on; and also looking at becoming a survivor of a crime later on; or dying of suicide. So it was quite an extensive study, it had quite a big sample size at that point in time, and it was very historic in psychology. It's something you should really really read about if you get the chance to.

But one of the important things to come out of that study, besides its findings, was this questionnaire called as the ACEs questionnaire. The ACEs questionnaire is basically a ten item questionnaire, which talks about some specific kinds of trauma. So it talks about physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical

neglect, and emotional neglect. Yeah? Basically, these five kinds of traumas have two items each.

And people ask, "What is the cut off score?" Well, the ideal score on a questionnaire like this is hopefully you don't have any adverse childhood experiences. But the study basically predicted that, on the ACEs questionnaire, if you have four or more as your score, then that increases your likelihood to develop the aforementioned conditions. Now that does not necessarily mean that, if you have experienced four or more items which are mentioned on this questionnaire, then this means that you are doomed to a life of suffering and pain and mental illness. There is also another factor over there called resilience.

Resilience basically is a construct or an idea which comes from the field of positive psychology, and in positive psychology, we really look at—How are people happy? How do people bounce back from problems? How do people survive tragedies and move ahead in life? And in a time like this, where the world is seeing a pandemic like Corona, resilience is definitely something that would be really really helpful to talk about.

So resilience, and the questionnaire which talks about resilience, was something that was developed in the early 2000s and was updated a few years ago in 2013. And the scoring system of this questionnaire is also based similarly on the ACEs questionnaire. So this one, instead of 10, it has 14 items and some of the things that it looks at is your relationship with your biological parents, it looks at the relationship that your family had with the society, it looks at your relationship with extended family and relatives, it looks at how safe you felt, how emotionally supported you felt, and your belief and outlook about the world when growing up. We'll link both of these questionnaires in the description of this podcast, so that you can have a look at both of them.

But, essentially what we're basically trying to say to you is that, the ACEs study is something which has helped a lot of people validate and identify that their experiences were traumatic, and that the mental illnesses or the challenges with their mental health that they faced later on in life—or were facing in life—were not their fault. It was not an individual shortcoming but were a consequence of the challenges that they faced. And when we look at resilience as another component, additionally to this, we realise that not only has there been suffering but there has been resistance to that suffering.

So it's important for us to also look at the role of resilience and resistance when we talk about childhood traumas or atrocities or any kind. So I think the point that I'm trying to make, through this short concise sharing with you right now, is that: Definitely, childhood experiences and traumas do play a role in shaping the person that you are in the future. But you are not limited or you are not defined by what happened to you in your childhood, even if it was painful and a

traumatic one. And one of the things that ensures that you are not what your childhood was, or you are not just the traumatic experiences that happened to you in your childhood, is the role of resilience. And resilience is something that is internal to you, it is something that can be enhanced through corrective emotional experiences in therapy and outside of therapy.

So the bottom line is that, even if there has been a dark past, there is no rule which says that you can't have a bright future, that you can't have hope and happiness and joy and love and all those meaningful & fulfilling experiences which one thinks one will never be able to have if they've had a painful childhood.

So, do read up about the ACEs study and the Resilience questionnaire. We'll share the links with you in the bottom of this podcast and, if this sparks some thoughts about what's happened in your childhood or what's going on currently in your life and you'd like to explore that in therapy, it's never a bad time to do that. Please reach out to us at hello@alternativestory.in and we'd be happy to help you.

And until next time, this is Paras saying bye-bye and take care.