

Youth Support - Professional Training
Reprints - Series Two No 6

"Emotional Abuse - The Hidden scars"

Emotional Abuse - the hidden scars.

"I cannot accept these conditions"
"..They have been accepted for you"

These were the words with which Kiril Lakota was released from seventeen years imprisonment in the film version of "The shoes of the Fisherman". So do we, as children enter the world; our conditions laid down for us. The emotional maelstrom into which we are pitched is beyond our control - we are wounded, react, build up defences and become battle scarred.

Emotional abuse is one of the categories officially recognised in Britain as a criterion for placing a child's name on a social services child protection register - but what is 'Emotional Abuse?'

When I first held a workshop entitled 'Emotional abuse - the hidden scars' I had a fraught conversation with a doctor who wanted to know what the scars were and if he could learn how to find them on a child's body - it gave us all a good laugh - but in reality saddened me that the emotional side is so often forgotten in the search for evidence of abuse. And why do my profession, the medical profession, come in large numbers to my lectures on physical abuse and sexual abuse but drop out almost entirely on the emotional workshops? Have we trained a generation of doctors who cannot think holistically and instead look on the body as so many moving parts - or have we failed to prepare them for 'real life'. Are they as afraid of their patient's feelings as they are of their own?

Perhaps we should begin by considering how we define abuse? The very word 'abuse' carries a world of subjective feelings and ulterior motives. Does it convey a different meaning to different individuals - to the 'victim', 'perpetrator' or 'professional' ? The word has certainly been coloured by the isolation and shame of the victim; by the secret fear of the perpetrator and by the anxiety of the professional dreading a witch-hunt. Physical child abuse has gone under various labels - battered baby syndrome, Caffey's syndrome, non accidental injury, NAI to name a few. Whatever terminology we use, the effect on the child is the same ...

Abuse can be categorised under various headings
- physical, verbal, sexual, emotional
- are there others?

how about - neglect, starvation, ignoring, withdrawal, withholding.

What therefore is emotional abuse? Perhaps if we consider that physical abuse is - assault on the 'person' - perhaps emotional abuse is - assault on the 'personality'. The whole manner in which that individual copes with feelings and everyday situations will be profoundly affected. There will be damage to - confidence - self worth - ability to feel - ability to communicate - 'integrity' as a person. In place of confidence and self worth, there will be instilled - Fear, Guilt and Insecurity.

Obviously emotional abuse can occur with or without physical harm, although the converse is hardly possible. It is the emotional component of abuse which is potentially the most devastating aspect. This may result in damage on several levels - to the individual's present emotional well-being - in other words causing immediate emotional pain; hindering and injuring the child's emotional development and evoking maladaptive patterns of response.

Emotional abuse -> - harms present emotional well-being
 -> - hinders development of emotional feeling self
 -> - carrying 'damaged pattern' of emotional response into adulthood.

We can be 'abused' or maltreated either by receiving something bad or by being deprived of something good. Hence, borrowing the terminology of TA (Transactional Analysis), abuse could be defined in terms of 'strokes'.

Abuse could be defined as either - giving negative 'strokes'
 OR - withholding positive 'strokes'

Strokes are acts of recognition - acknowledgements of a person's presence or existence. They may be physical or verbal, praise or criticism. A human being needs a certain minimum number of strokes in order to survive - some people are 'programmed' to be able to survive on a very low level of strokes and some external strokes can be supplanted by internal strokes - but without strokes the individual is deprived and declines.

Negative strokes are better than no strokes at all. People growing up in an abusing situation are used to receiving mainly negative strokes, they grow to expect negatives, feel they deserve them and regard positives as suspect.

If an abusing world is the only world you know, that is your reality.

STROKES		
	positive	negative
Physical	Hugs	blows
Verbal	praise	criticism
	positive	negative
Unconditional	"I love you"	"I hate you"
Conditional	"I like you when you're sober"	"I can't stand you when you bite your nails"

Mechanisms of potential emotional damage can follow various routes viz - negative physical strokes causing emotional as well as physical harm - an obvious example being the emotional aftermath of a sexual assault; negative verbal strokes causing a negative emotional response as in a child taunted and called names by school bullies; or the neglected child who is deprived of love and positive strokes and thus suffers emotional starvation.

physical abuse	= -ve physical strokes --> emotional harm
verbal abuse	= -ve verbal strokes --> emotional response
neglect	= withholding +ve strokes --> emotional starvation

Why are we vulnerable to emotional abuse? How do bad feelings begin? Emotional abuse begins at an early age - the seeds have to be sown very early on in life to 'prime' the developing personality to 'expect' further knocks. The first messages can be very subtle, almost going unnoticed ..

Imagine the baby. Lying in her cot.

... when I'm hungry, I get fed, ...when I'm wet, I get changed. When I gurgle they come to listen when I smile, a loving face comes near to me. I feel important, loved and wanted.

Then one day I wake up, it's dark, the curtain's flapping ...I'm afraid. I cry .. nobody comes .. I feel so alone .. nobody wants me ... I must have done something wrong I'm not so important any more ... I'm not worth loving any more.....

The child who grows up secure in it's relationship with mother - (with good object relations) will not be so vulnerable to emotional abuse. A child learns how to deal with emotions by using the relationship with mother or mother figure, as a 'prototype'. Raw, primitive feelings, profound love, deep hate, cannot be held by the infant without the tempering effect of mother's reactions. The child projects his feelings onto mother who mirrors them back in tolerable form. A child learns to love himself from the way he is loved by others.

If the infant can feel his mother's love directed at him, a unique new child, he will have the ability to develop a confident loving 'self', a self which is protected from the worst ravages of future emotional abuse. However if the child is unloved, ignored or finds himself wanting in his mother's eyes, he will be unable to find the strength and confidence to show his true self to the world and he will hide behind the shadow of what he thinks others wish to see - this false self is forever vulnerable to emotional trauma - the 'victim' par excellence.

So the child will feel bad about himself, will feel guilty that he cannot make mother happy, and will be ready to meet the reinforcement of other abusing situations. He may be unable to show his real feelings, may substitute one (permitted) feeling for another (taboo) feeling. Not be himself.

Reinforcing memories are selectively remembered, just as reinforcing events are subjectively regarded. Everything which 'fits' with the script decision or they way we feel about ourselves is taken on board, emphasised and used to underline and justify the position. Anything which does not fit is discarded and ignored. Hence the child who felt she was bad and worthless will become the adult who cannot accept compliments - "She's only saying that to be nice, it's not really true" but whose supertuned senses pick up every whisper of a slight or derogatory comment "There you are, I knew she didn't really like me".

Emotional abuse can be overtly manifest in hatred and rejection, or subtly wearing away like water dripping on a stone. In whatever degree however it alters the child's very being and leaves a legacy to be carried into adulthood. Ruth, said of the bullies in her school "They changed me, that's what I can't forgive or forget. Whatever happens to me now, whatever I do, I can never again be the same person, or the person that I would have been if I had not been put down and afraid all that time".

Just as adverse situations can cause emotional harm, so favourable conditions can help heal the wounds. We can use such therapeutic events to aid recovery. Perhaps the easiest way to understand the process is to see how it affects ourselves. Emotional 'abuse' is part and parcel of living. There is no human being on this earth who has not suffered in some degree from emotional trauma, it is merely a matter of degree. Hence each of us has a part of ourselves which can empathise with our more seriously affected companions.

How would we answer the key questions which indicate the factors keeping our own 'merry-go-round' turning? What would the beliefs, behaviours and reinforcements be for ourselves? What do you believe about yourself, others, your life. Are you a successful caring person, are you a failure, do you feel good about yourself, do you feel good about your life? Do you believe things usually turn out well for you or do you generally end up making a mess of things?

What situations do you keep finding yourself in? Do you keep giving in to people or find you've been made a fool of? Do you always find yourself in conflict with a dominant boss? Are you always left 'holding the baby'?

Which scenes in your life keep replaying in your mind? The time you got lost in the shopping precinct and separated from your mother (reinforcing rejection), the time you broke your grandmother's favourite vase and hid the pieces (reinforcing guilt).

- Key Questions -

A 1 What do you believe about - yourself
- others
- your life

How do you feel about those beliefs?

2 Do you believe things always turn out in a certain way for you?

B What situations do you keep experiencing over and over again?

Do you find yourself saying "Here I go again!"

C What life events seem most significant to you
What do you keep remembering?

Having identified 'script' beliefs which are binding us in the pain of emotional turmoil, we can now intervene, challenge these beliefs and release ourselves from the treadmill of repetitive harmful behaviour patterns.

Why do we believe we are bad, of course we are not 'bad', look at all the evidence that we are as good as the next person, or even better. There are alternative interpretations of past events. As children we often took two and two and made five, interpretations and conclusions made in the past may not hold up to the vision of the present. There are also alternative ways of behaving in a given situation, we do not have to always react in our well rehearsed 'scripty' manner. Alternatives may first have to be tried out as 'homework options' before they can be utilised naturally.

Similarly the significance of past memories must be challenged and alternatives suggested. Could the memory, with a subtly different 'selection', also reinforce the opposite premise? Suppose we were to even make up an alternative ending to our childhood 'remembered' stories? How about if the frog got the princess for a change. Suppose grandmother hated the broken vase and only cared in case you had hurt yourself? What if you were a confident explorer in the shopping precinct and mother praised you for your initiative while being overjoyed to find you again?.

Intervention

- | | | |
|---|--------------------|---|
| A | Challenge beliefs | |
| B | Stop behaviour | options - homework |
| C | Challenge memories | significance
opposite experiences
create new endings to stories |

The transition we need to eventually make is from a 'victim' position of "I don't like being abused" (But can't do anything about it because really I deserve it) through a midway position of "I don't deserve to be treated badly" to a self confident and self appraising position of "I deserve to be treated well!"

----> "I don't deserve to be treated badly"

"I don't like being abused"

----> "I deserve to be treated well"

