



# Childhood Cancer: A Trauma Perspective

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# What is Trauma?

- ▶ A disturbing or distressing event that impacts you physically, emotionally and psychologically
- ▶ Acute Trauma: Events that occur at a particular time and place
  - ▶ Usually short lived; such as a job loss, sudden loss of a loved one or natural disaster.
  - ▶ Usually cause overwhelming feelings of terror, horror, or helplessness.
- ▶ Complex Trauma: Exposure to repeated trauma over long periods of time, such as continual sexual abuse or domestic violence.
  - ▶ Usually cause intense feelings of fear, loss of trust in others, decreased sense of personal safety, guilt and shame.

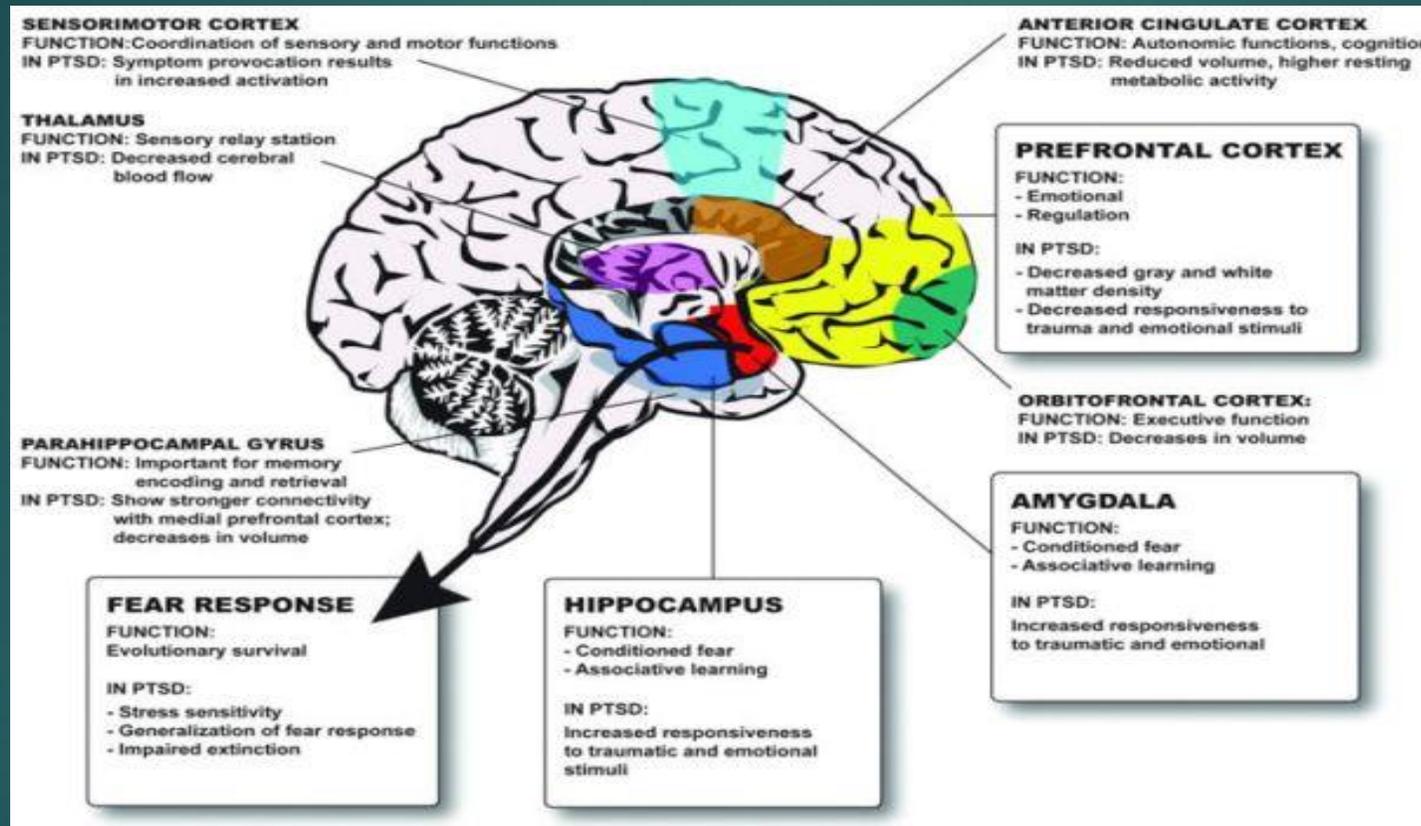
**Would you characterized childhood cancer as an acute or complex trauma?**

# Lets take a moment to...

- ▶ Consider a time in your life that was distressing
  - ▶ Loss of a job, divorce, death of a pet, car accident, illness/injury to self or loved one, natural disaster, etc.
- ▶ Go back to that moment in your mind...
  - ▶ What do you hear around you?
  - ▶ What do you smell?
  - ▶ Who/what do you see?
  - ▶ What can you touch?
- ▶ What were you feeling in this moment? What are you feeling now?

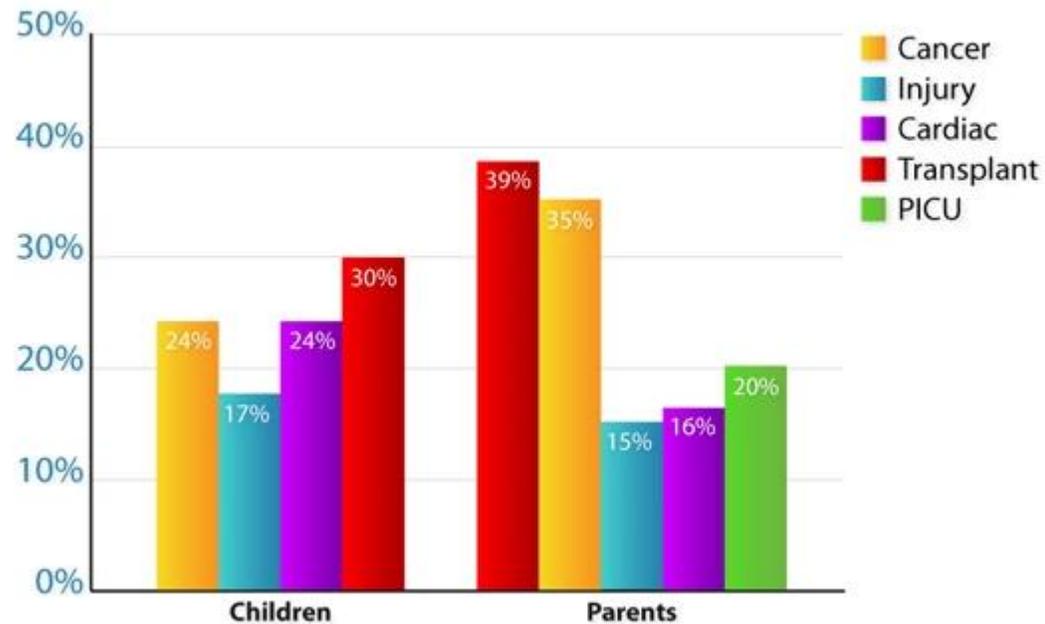
For many individuals trauma experiences can be triggered based upon any one of the five senses...a smell of food similar to the hospital, a noise that mimics when they are engaging in treatment,

# Why do past experiences continue to affect us?



# Consider the Statistics

Percent of children & parents with significant traumatic stress symptoms after medical events



Summary of research findings from The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.  
Summarized from peer-reviewed research studies, 1999-2009.  
*Note: Traumatic stress levels in children in pediatric intensive care has not yet been well-documented.*

# Consider the Statistics

- ▶ 30-45% of Parents and Siblings and 15-20% of Childhood cancer survivors experience traumatic symptoms years after treatment has ended
  - ▶ Pre-existing vulnerabilities
  - ▶ Prior behavioral and emotional concerns
  - ▶ Personal opinions about the event (their narrative)
- ▶ How Behavioral Health Professionals assist cancer survivors and families with PTSS and PTSD symptoms
  - ▶ Normalize Experience of PTSS and Cancer
  - ▶ **Provide additional support for those with cancer-related PTSD**
  - ▶ **Explore post-traumatic growth**

<https://www.chop.edu/centers-programs/cancer-center/posttraumatic-stress-pediatric-cancer>

# Why are some people more affected by a traumatic event than others?

- ▶ The affect of the trauma is dependent upon characteristics of the individual,
- ▶ Type and characteristics of the event
- ▶ Developmental Processes
- ▶ The meaning of the trauma
- ▶ Sociocultural factors

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>

**How do we as support persons and caregivers, make meaning of a childhood cancer diagnosis?**

# PROTECTIVE FACTORS TO TRAUMA

Psychological Resources	Physical Resources	Environmental resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Adaptive use of coping mechanisms</li><li>• Sense of competence and mastery</li><li>• Stable sense of self</li><li>• Hope and optimism about the future</li><li>• Realistic concept of death</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Good Physical Health</li><li>• Intelligence</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Availability of supportive, nurturing family environment</li><li>• Consistent social support network</li><li>• Stable friendships</li></ul>

F. Norris, et al, "Risk Factors for Adverse Outcomes in Natural and Human-Caused Disasters: A Review of the Empirical Literature," A National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet, 2002. [www.ncptsd.org/facts/disasters/fs\\_riskfactors.html](http://www.ncptsd.org/facts/disasters/fs_riskfactors.html)

# Potential Symptoms of Trauma In Elementary School-Age Students

- ▶ Fearful of current and future safety
- ▶ Separation anxiety
- ▶ Mood and Irritable
- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Aggression
- ▶ Absenteeism
- ▶ Increased physical complaints
- ▶ Loss of concentration
- ▶ Preoccupation with the event
- ▶ Traumatic Play
- ▶ Easily startled
- ▶ Nightmares and other sleep issues
- ▶ Preoccupation with death and dying
- ▶ Inability to understand permanency of death

# Potential Symptoms of Trauma In Middle School-Age Students

- ▶ Fears for own and others' safety
- ▶ Separation anxiety
- ▶ Decrease in concentration and focus
- ▶ Feelings of responsibility
- ▶ Guilt
- ▶ Hyperactivity
- ▶ Decreased Academic Performance
- ▶ Irritability
- ▶ Angry and aggressive outbursts
- ▶ Withdrawal
- ▶ Decrease in interest of usual activities
- ▶ Absenteeism
- ▶ Increased physical complaints
- ▶ Compulsive need to discuss gruesome details
- ▶ Repetitious discussion and questions about the event
- ▶ Disturbance of sleep patterns

# Potential Symptoms of Trauma In High School-Age Students

- ▶ Anxiety about future traumatic events
- ▶ Withdrawal
- ▶ Irritability with friends and teachers
- ▶ Decreased or no impulse control
- ▶ Distrust
- ▶ Decreased concentration and attention
- ▶ Absenteeism
- ▶ Reduced school performance
- ▶ Hyperarousal
- ▶ Preoccupation with death, dying and suicide
- ▶ Vulnerability
- ▶ Acting out such as dropping out, running away, sexual promiscuity, and risk taking
- ▶ Substance Abuse
- ▶ Guilt
- ▶ Self-blame

# Provide additional support for those with cancer-related PTSD

- ▶ Keep Students in the Classroom!
  - ▶ 1 in 5 students are diagnosed with mental health concerns
  - ▶ 1 in 4 in the state of Virginia
  - ▶ Creating environment that emphasizes emotional wellness becomes the Norm!
- ▶ Create a Ritual
  - ▶ Mandala Activity
  - ▶ Sanctuary Model
- ▶ Anxiety/Self-Soothing Tool Kits
- ▶ 2-Minute breaks for the class/not the individual
- ▶ Individual Safety Plans

# Vicarious Trauma

- ▶ A stress reaction experienced by therapists, counselors, school personnel, and victim support volunteers who are exposed to disclosures of traumatic images, stories, and materials.
- ▶ Exposure causes a long-term change in the individual's perceptions and manner of dealing with the traumatized individuals.
- ▶ A central component to vicarious trauma is a disruption in the individual's spirituality or perceived meaning or hope.
- ▶ Signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma parallel those of traditional traumatic experience but are less intense.

**Important Notes for Teachers: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network suggest that you seek support and consultation routinely for yourself in order to prevent "compassion fatigue," also referred to as "secondary traumatic stress." Be aware that you can develop compassion fatigue from exposure to trauma through the children with who you work.**

# Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma

- ▶ Social withdrawal
- ▶ Emotional lability
- ▶ Aggression
- ▶ Greater sensitivity to violence
- ▶ Somatic complaints
- ▶ Sleep disturbances
- ▶ Intrusive imagery
- ▶ Cynicism
- ▶ Sexual difficulties
- ▶ Difficulty managing boundaries with students
- ▶ Difficulty with trust, esteem, intimacy, and control