Poverty and Traumatic Stress: Strategies for Building Family Resilience

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Continuing Education
Commercial Disclosure

I, Laurel Kiser, have the following commercial relationship(s) to disclose:

• Book royalties
• Grant support
• Training and consultation contracts
• Speakers fees
Agenda

• Poverty as Context
• Impact on Families
• Building Resilience

As a result of attending this workshop, attendees will ...

1. understand the context of urban poverty
2. review adaptations that children and families make given exposure to chronic stress and multiple traumas
3. gain ideas about how to increase the natural healing resources of families
POVERTY AS CONTEXT
Life in Poverty

Addictions

Social & System Demands

FINANCIAL INSTABILITY

DISCRIMINATION & STIGMA

DAILY HASSLES

Loss & Grief

VIOLENCE

RESIDENTIAL INSTABILITY

Neglect

Isolation
Economic Hardship

- No living wage
- Limited opportunity
- Never having enough
- Welfare and Aid to Dependent Families
Separate and Unequal

• Concentrated poverty
• Discrimination
• Segregation, isolation, and mistrust
• Neighborhood disintegration
• Residential instability
• Inadequate transportation
• Inferior education systems
• Police brutality
• Healthcare disparities
• Food deserts
• Community violence
Intergenerational Poverty

- Skipped generation
- Multi-generation families
- Patterns of lack of protection
- Cycles of violence and loss
Synergistic Adverse Childhood Experiences

• Females
  – 2 or more ACEs
  – sexual abuse with
    • DV
    • victim of crime
    • poverty
    • parental mental illness
    • loss of parent

• Males
  – 3 ACEs
  – poverty with
    • sexual abuse
    • parental substance abuse
    • loss of parent

CANarratives.org
Data from the National Comorbidity Survey – Replication Sample
Continuous Trauma:
What if Trauma Isn’t “Post”?

• Ongoing, realistic threat and danger from multiple perpetrators across multiple sites (home, neighborhood, school, transport routes) = an absence of safe spaces
• Violence as a condition rather than an event
• Anticipation of future harm is realistic, and recovery from each incident of danger must happen in an environment of ongoing threat
• Activation of ‘survival brain’ is not a false alarm

Associate Professor Debbie Kaminer
Department of Psychology
University of Cape Town
Accumulated Traumatic Circumstances

• exposure to multiple and on-going stressors
• repeated cataclysmic events (or traumas)
• along with associated secondary stressors including *continued threats*
IMPACT ON FAMILIES
Adaptations

Accumulated Traumatic Circumstances

What psychological adaptations are required to survive under these conditions? How do we determine whether these are functional or maladaptive? What does ‘helping’ or ‘recovery’ mean if conditions do not change?

- Debbie Kaminer
What do we mean by "survival tools"?

Survival tools usually help us to...

• escape or deter perceived threats
• alleviate pain or distress caused by a perceived inescapable threat

We can think of survival tools as ways that any reasonable family would act in order to escape a threat or alleviate pain.
The Impact of Poverty and Trauma on Family Systems

- Environmental Hazards
- Social and Public Incivilities
- Daily Hassles
- Financial Instability
- Residential Instability
- Trauma

Family Processes
- Child Response
- Sibling Relations
- Parent-Child Relations
- Parenting Practices & Quality
- Adult/Parental Response
- Adult Intimate Relations
- Adult Family of Origin Response

Time*
Acute and longer-term effects
Individual development
Family life cycle

Outcomes
Family Adaptation to Accumulated Traumatic Circumstances

(Kiser, Gardner, Strieder, Collins, & Connors, 2013)

- shifts in needs & relational dynamics
- role changes
- altered subsystem functioning

- anxious anticipatory coping style
- systemic dysregulations
- disturbed relations & supports
- altered schemas

- response dyssynchronies
- coping styles & strategies
- vulnerability to disorders

- individual distress
- disturbances in the family unit
- reciprocal distress reactions

lapses or declines in the family's ability to serve its basic functions
Anxious Anticipatory Coping Style

“anticipatory stress, by its very nature, is a cognitive construct which is ‘learned’ (Logan, Risner, & Muller, p. 9).”
Systemic Dysregulations

- Chronic wear and tear
- System no longer efficient at responding to the environment
- Alterations in physiological response within the family context
  - Safety system dysregulation
  - Difficulty modulating negative affect with heightened risk for conflict and violence
• Social context influences the stress response through physiological and cognitive processes.
## Disturbed Relations & Supports

### Intra-familial
- Compromised family solidarity
- Poor communication channels
- Heightened levels of negativity and conflict
- Decreased relational security
- Family membership transitions or dissolution

### Extra-familial
- Mistrust
  - negative representation of relationships
  - suspiciousness
- Heightened levels of negativity and conflict
- Social withdrawal and isolation

### Supports
- Difficulty identifying resources
- Difficulty asking for or accepting support
- Compromised and burned out support network
- Limited or absent reciprocity
- Avoidance of help-seeking
Altered Schemas*

• Family schemas become consistent with traumatic exposures
  – biased family appraisals and inferencing regarding risk, danger and ability to cope
  – rules, beliefs, and world views changed

*may increase individual family members vulnerability to PTSD when exposed to trauma
(Weingarten, 2004)
Reciprocal Distress Reactions

- Distress Related to Accumulated Trauma
- Caregiver Functioning
- Child Caregiving Needs
- Caregiving Subsystem

Connections:
- a from Distress Related to Accumulated Trauma to Caregiver Functioning
- a from Child Caregiving Needs to Distress Related to Accumulated Trauma
- b from Caregiver Functioning to Child Caregiving Needs
- c from Caregiving Subsystem to Caregiver Functioning
Response Dyssynchronies

• Different traumatic exposures
• Differing appraisals of events and contexts
• Continuum of responses
• Individual, developmentally appropriate coping strategies and styles
• Developmental differences in response to trauma
lapses or declines in the family's ability to serve its basic functions

1. Struggle, and often fail, to provide safety, stability, and emotional security
2. Low or altered source of identification or sense of belonging
3. Decreased intergenerational transmission of protection and attachment
4. Limited resources for relating to the larger community
STRATEGIES TO BUILD FAMILY RESILIENCE
• Capacity to cope with stress, overcome adversity and thrive despite (and perhaps even because of) challenges in life

• The capacity of a **dynamic system** to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development

Panter-Brick & Leckman (2013); Masten (2011)
Families Who Thrive

- Acceptance of stressor
- Family-centered locus of problem
- Solution-focused problem-solving
- High tolerance
- Commitment
- Open, effective communication
- High cohesion
- Flexible roles
- Structure & predictability
- Efficient resource utilization
- Self-efficacy
- Shared beliefs
Intervention for Families Impacted by Trauma
# Ties to Trauma Treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Links to EBPs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physiological</td>
<td>Enhancing safety</td>
<td>cognitive therapy, exposure therapy, anxiety management training, mindfulness, kinesthetic activities</td>
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<td>Stress inoculation skills</td>
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<td>Exposure with response prevention</td>
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<td>Mastery</td>
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<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Psychoeducation</td>
<td>cognitive therapy, anxiety management training, evaluation/reframing of cognitions</td>
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<td>Cognitive processing</td>
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<td>Narrative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>Behavioral regulation (limits)</td>
<td>anxiety management training, kinesthetic activities</td>
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<td>Parenting skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Affective regulation</td>
<td>anxiety management training, direct exploration of the traumatic experience</td>
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<td>Narrative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>support, anxiety management training</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Narrative</td>
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Protective Family Coping Resources

• complex behavioral repertoires and skills characterized across the following dimensions:
  - Deliberateness
  - Structure
  - Connectedness
  - Resource Seeking
  - Co-regulation & Crisis Management
  - Positive Affect, Memories, & Meaning
Practice-based Evidence on SFCR

• Sample
  – included 185 families, pre/post data on 103 families

• Feasible
  – works in multiple types of sites
  – with families who have experienced many types of severe adversity and trauma

• Tolerable
  – data indicates that 50% of families taking part in the 15-week model are attending 11 or more sessions

• Effective
  – children experience significant reductions in symptoms of PTSD and in behavior problems
  – families gain skills in coping and stress reduction, and demonstrate healthier functioning

Family Rituals

• Family celebrations
• Traditions
• Daily routines
Ritual Family Tree

Growing Your Tree

Holidays
Daily Routines
Vacation
Leisure
Reunions
Anniversaries
Religion and Religious Practices
Foods
Legends
Celebrations
Other

Sharing your heritage
Discuss a particular ritual or tradition that is special to your family.
What makes it special? Has it changed over time?
How can you make sure that this ritual continues in your family?

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Shared Family Meals

Why are shared meals important?

• supports psychosocial development
• decreases behavior problems
• limits engagement in risky behavior
• improves academic achievement
Shared Family Meals

How do we make it work?

• Eat together often
• Limit distractions
• Make it special
• Talk about important stuff
Telling Family Stories

How Family Members Work Together to Tell a Good Story

• each member contributes
• give and take
• reflectivity
• multiple viewpoints considered and integrated into a shared version
• both positive and negative affect is acceptable
Story-Telling Ideas

• “Do You Know?”
• Visioning
• Reminiscing
• Values clarification
• Moral dilemmas
• Stories along the family timeline
• Family heroes and villains
Healing Aspects of Trauma Narrative

“Telling the story of the trauma pain allows the other family members to help you continue the story while changing the story line in a way that results in a better ending.”
- Lantz & Raiz, 2003, p.169

- Gradual exposure (approach vs. avoid)
- Desensitization/co-regulation
- Cognitive processing
- Re-construction of the story
- Integration of experience into coherent identity
Daily Routines

Poverty
meeting basic needs + daily hassles = high number of routines with low value

“the stress potential of life events is most clearly seen in its ability to disrupt family routines and add to daily hassles”
-Fiese & Wamboldt, 2000, p. 410-411
Worksheet: Step 1  
Developing Routines

Routines are the things we do the same way everyday, day after day. Routines can be developed by breaking certain activities down into steps and deciding what, when, and where each activity is done.

Pick a time of day when you need to get something done on a regular basis. Getting going in the morning, getting ready for bed are some examples. Break this activity down into the small steps it takes to get the job done. Then write out the when and where of each step. Be very specific as you fill in each box.

ROUTINE: ____________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Who</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>Where</th>
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<tbody>
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Bedtime Routines

A regular bedtime and a good night’s sleep are related to:

Behavior – when caregivers establish a regular bedtime, behavior problems go down.

Regulation – structured nighttime activities may be associated with physiological and emotional regulation.
Anticipatory Anxiety and Safety

Safety Mapping Activity

Invite the family to draw a map of their community/neighborhood. Identify places, rooms, houses, schools, stores, hospitals, churches, relatives’ and friends’ homes, etc. Include the place(s) where violence has occurred and places the family considers safe.
Stress Inoculation

• Teaching relaxation skills
  – Focused or controlled breathing
  – Progressive muscle relaxation
  – Safe place imagery
  – Mindfulness
  – Other calming activities

• Establishing a relaxation routine
Communicating Values

• Clarification of family values

Here are some values that some families think are important:

- Family time
- Love
- Respect
- Sharing
- Affection
- Privacy
- Religion
- Education
- Fun
- Money
- Work
- Home

• Living our values
Path to My Future

Step 1

Step 2

Step 3

Step 4
Child-friendly Activities
to Teach about Problem-Solving

Harold and the Purple Crayon By Crockett Johnson

So he put a frightening dragon under the trees to guard the apples.
It was a terribly frightening dragon.
It even frightened Harold. He backed away.
His hand holding the purple crayon shook.
Suddenly he realized what was happening.
But by then Harold was over his head in an ocean.
He came up thinking fast.

And what did he draw?
Adding to the Family Scrapbook
Making Positive Memories

• Play
• Positive experiences
• Affection
• Laughter

“What feels good to you?”

“Getting tickled feels good”
Fun & Laughter Promote Resilience

– Fun and laughter help people relax physically and mentally.
  • Laughter, like mild exercise, increases blood flow and exercises the muscles.
  • Fun and laughter help people see the light side of stressful situations.

– Fun and laughter help us develop a positive, optimistic outlook on life. Humor helps us see the “big picture,” notice the good as well as the bad, and create positive visions of the future.

– Humor, laughter, and family fun build positive family relationships, which are central to healthy development.

Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009
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