

Trauma and Addiction Examined

By Jim Rachels



Since I've started Addicts Anonymous I've spoken with and interviewed many people in regards to their stories of addiction and recovery. I would say that roughly about ninety percent of the people I speak with have had some type of trauma in their past. And most of this trauma happened to them as children. I've come to understand from this experience that so many people have been suffering all throughout their life and that a lot of their trauma played a part in their addiction.

Gabor Mate is a best-selling author and an expert in the field of trauma and addiction. His theory is that many and maybe all addiction issues arise from trauma that person has experienced in their life and mostly as children. A great quote I heard from him was "the addiction is not the primary problem, it's an attempt to solve a problem." I think this is so true. Many of us addicts can certainly get on board with that way of thinking. I think we are simply trying to numb ourselves from the pain that our trauma has caused us. This has been shown to be true time and time again. So in essence we are trying to solve a problem. Another thing Gabor Mate believes is that drugs in and of themselves are not addictive. It is our reaction to the drugs that matters. Some of us have more trauma in our lives which leads us towards drugs. Some do not have that trauma that leads them into addictive behavior. His example is to look at all the people that are prescribed opioids. It's only a small part of those people taking it that it turns into a full-blown addiction. So what is the difference between those that end up addicted and those who don't? Gabor Mate feels the difference is childhood trauma. He believes everyone addicted has some kind of trauma.

People with trauma are also living in fear. They also feel lonely and have the feeling no one is coming to help them. No relief, just fear and dread. You feel out of control and lonely. This is what people with trauma are dealing with on a daily basis. Some of these people just feel misunderstood.

Many of these victims had their trauma happen to them as a child. This is a struggle that people have to deal with every day. This never goes away. This daily battle that people with PTSD face can be exhausting. It can feel as if it's taking over every part of your life. It's a relentless assault of thoughts, feelings, and guilt. Let's look at some data and information:

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA):

- 75 percent of women and men in substance abuse treatment report histories of abuse and trauma.
- 97 percent of homeless women with mental illness report severe physical or sexual abuse.
- 12-34 percent of individuals in substance abuse treatment have PTSD.
- About one-third of people exposed to trauma develop PTSD. Men report higher incidences of trauma, but women are more likely to develop PTSD.

This shows that trauma is playing a huge part in a lot of people with addiction issues. These numbers are staggering to me. To say that ninety-seven percent of homeless women report a history of abuse and trauma is crazy to me. The data is overwhelming and we're heading in the wrong direction. Something needs to be fixed. We truly need to start thinking about and focusing on preventative measures to help combat this growing problem.

Another thing I've learned from my research is everyone handles their trauma differently. Hypothetically if two people experienced the same exact situation and trauma they would both still process what has just happened differently. They have two completely different sets of mentalities and personalities that contribute to this. This is extremely important to recognize if this is to help anyone in their recovery.

Another stat that really got to me is that 75 percent of women and men in substance abuse treatment report histories of abuse and trauma. When it comes to nature versus nurture the research is still being conducted and there is no definitive answer to this question. But I get the feeling that many of us turn to drugs, alcohol, and compulsive behaviors to forget and numb ourselves from the trauma we have experienced throughout our life. And this can be many types of trauma. It can be sexual abuse, physical abuse, mental abuse, and many more types of abuse that contribute to this.

For me personally, I have some triggers based on my childhood trauma. Part of that is I have a fear of abandonment. I think this is to do with my mother leaving when I was eight years old. I just felt utterly alone and abandoned. There is no other way to describe it. And being so young events like this end up shaping the way we see the world around us.

My mother leaving was a great trauma for me. I remember feeling so sad and so unloved. I just wanted my Mom. I screamed and I yelled for her but she never came back the way I wanted. I had terrible night terrors. I believe this trauma helped shape the rest of my entire life. The trauma of a profound loss is a powerful thing. My trauma has defined my entire life and I'm just waking up to that fact recently.

I think some of us are in such denial for quite a long time. I think this is a mechanism the body and mindset up to protect you from these things. I

think all these things that were going on around that time we're building up and setting me on a course right into addiction.

So what leads to addiction? I think so many of us addicts are trying to just numb ourselves to the thoughts of our abuse and troubled past. We have so many feelings and thoughts going through our heads that we just don't want to feel it anymore. I think just the thought of having to face our own fears without any help is a terrifying prospect for most of us addicts. We end up making the choice to use drugs or alcohol or act out compulsively instead of trying to just face our problems head-on. In essence, we try to hide and protect ourselves from that potential pain. This in turn just leads to sinking deeper and deeper into depression, anxiety and then eventually relapse which would then cause more and more pain.

Many of us experience this at a young age but abuse is not just a childhood thing. Some people have decent childhoods but still end up in abusive relationships later on in life. This is something that can happen to anyone and at any time. These can be verbally, mentally, or physically abusive relationships that people end up getting involved in. And all these situations can lead to trauma.

I think abuse ends up leaving a void, a large empty hole inside of ourselves. A hole that so many of us long to fill with something. And we seek out anything we can to help with these feelings of helplessness. The problem is that we addicts choose to fill our void with our compulsive behavior or with drugs and alcohol.

I believe the legal system also leads to trauma. Many people agree that addicts are sick people and not criminals. We have built a system that is meant to punish and shame these people and add a stigma to them. If these people are sick how can we throw them in jail for their disease? How does this help rehabilitate anyone? How are we supposed to help these people if we continue on this path? We're treating them with judgment instead of the compassion so many of them so desperately need. Many people go into jail a decent person with minor offenses and because of their experience in jail they come out much different and not usually for the better. I've heard people say that jail is college for the newer criminals. And as far as trauma goes there are lots of fights in jail as well as dealing with sexual assault. Going to prison can be an extremely traumatic experience for someone.

Trauma also physically changes the brain. This I read on the internet from *Old Vineyard Behavioral Health Services*: As the brain begins growing and maturing during childhood, it creates, strengthens, and occasionally discards neural connections, which compose a network between neurons that imbue the brain with its many functions. In short, the growth of the

brain and its eventual physical structure are significantly affected by one's experiences, both the positive and the negative. And while experience often leads to the brain developing in ways that are beneficial, the experience can also be negative, which can impede or otherwise alter the brain's development.

So as you can see it is not just positive events that affect brain function. It also has to do with negative events which impact the brain. This is why trauma is so powerful when you are a child as this is the part of your life where the brain is being molded and is adapting to its surroundings.

Studies have also shown that there is a high comorbidity between PTSD with substance abuse disorders and other mental disorders. So alongside many of the negative events that have impacted someone's life PTSD is also prevalent. And it should be said that diseases and disorders come with a stigma attached to them.

Trauma is an incredibly important thing whether people acknowledge it or not. It ends up PTSD will change the chemistry of your brain and the addiction and the PTSD feed off one another. For example, PTSD will help trigger substance abuse.

According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs nearly three-quarters of those surviving violent or abusive trauma report alcohol use disorders. It just further solidifies those two things feed off of one another.

It is important to look out for some warning signs of these things. So what are they? Through some research into this topic, I came across something that says there are different categories of PTSD.

From *Addictioncenter.com*: The first category is Intrusive Memories. These consist of vivid flashbacks, physical reactions to reminders of the traumatic event, and night terrors about the event.

The second category is Avoidance. This consists of Attempting to avoid talking or thinking about the traumatic episode and Trying to avoid people, places, and activities that trigger memories of the event.

Then there are Drastic Changes in Thinking or Mood. This is made up of emotional numbness, difficulty maintaining close relationships, incapable of positive emotions, lapses in memory, and negative feelings about self and others.

Lastly, we have Changes in Emotional Reactions. This can be Irritability, Feeling "on guard" at all times, Overwhelming guilt or shame, insomnia, and self-destructive behaviors.

This is some great information and I mention this information as I think it is of the utmost importance to know what to be looking out for as far as

warning signs of an impending episode. How are we to know how to battle these symptoms if we have no warning sign to identify and then work on the situation. Therefore it is a great idea to study yourself. Try to identify patterns in your behavior based on what is going on at the present moment that leads to certain thoughts or actions. Once you can identify what may or may not be a trigger for yourself you will be much more prepared to deal with whatever outcome happens.

So I hope I've shown that there are many connections between addiction and trauma. I think if we start with the root cause of the situation and attack at the starting point we will have greater results. We also need to see that trauma and addiction feed off of each other and you need to take care of one in order to treat the other. That's why I also mentioned knowing about the different signs and symptoms to be on the lookout for and how important that is.