

A WARM HUG CAN GO A LONG WAY:

The influence of childhood trauma on addiction

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Imagine mindlessly scrolling through your Instagram feed, your day was subpar at best, and there is this unexplained weight on your chest. You toss, and you turn, there seems to be this emptiness; you see your friends enjoying experiences that bring no joy to you; it makes you feel hollow and unsatisfied. You try harder to distract yourself from the overwhelming thoughts by watching something on Netflix, but you can't help but feel that you are not good enough, that you are not loved, that you're worthless and a person existing just to satisfy others' needs. The heaviness in your chest is growing, it is consuming you, and you try to feel some relief. You find something; you need to find something; a drink, a smoke, a sexual experience, a bet that helps you escape that feeling. You feel light, understood and happy after perhaps a long time. Yet, the effect does not sustain, and the cycle repeats itself. Many people addicted to substances, gambling, social media and much more experience this daily with greater severity.

Addiction is a bio-psycho-social disorder. It includes compulsive engagement in rewarding stimuli. The person has a deficit in their perceived autonomy (Levy, 2006) over their behavior and continues to engage in them despite adverse consequences. Addiction is a complex disorder. It results in a holistic dysfunction that affects the body, mind and interpersonal relationships.

There is extensive literature on attachment-oriented research in individuals with substance use disorders (SUD) and other types of addiction (Schindler, 2019). The attachment theory is a prevalent theory in psychology that helps us understand the child's attachment with their primary caregivers. Attachment has a fundamentally evolutionary function; it is a behavioral and interactional strategy that offers security to vulnerable offsprings in various species (Simpson & Belsky, 2008).

As a child, when we feel threatened or in danger, we desire and seek closeness and comfort from our attachment figures (mostly parents). In those moments, our parents could either understand those needs and soothe us and provide a sense of safety or neglect those needs, leading to an insecure attachment towards the primary caregivers. Childhood trauma that makes us feel threatened informs the attachment we develop. The insecure attachment style may transform into adolescent (Savcı & Aysan, 2016) and adult attachment styles and perhaps be reinforced based on later life events. But why is this important to discuss? On the surface level, it informs how much we might trust our attachments with other people, which influences our interpersonal relationships.

However, when examined further, a secure attachment is vital to developing one's own coping methods when faced with fear or distress. We learn from our caregivers on how to soothe ourselves in a way that is functional to our wellbeing. When these coping skills are compromised, we struggle to manage our stress when faced with threatening situations (Garami et al., 2018). Such events activate the brain's reward circuits resulting in a common neural substrate to be created, which may improve the sensation and enjoyment of drug use, increase self-administration, raise cravings, and increase the risk of relapse after a period of abstinence (Garami et al., 2018).

According to attachment theory, substance misuse can be viewed as "self-medication" or an endeavour to compensate for an absence of attachment methods (Schindler, 2019) and coping mechanisms we develop in early childhood. As mentioned, those with an insecure attachment have a deficit in developing functional coping mechanisms. Hence, those who are addicted adopt different dysfunctional coping mechanisms that are detrimental. In many heroin addicts, when asked about the effect and the sensation of the drug, they described it as a 'warm, soft hug' (Wonderly, 2021).

This gives an interesting insight into the impact of severe deprivation in developing a secure attachment and how many people perceive the bodily sensations of feeling hugged, of being connected. As humans, we crave interpersonal relationships as it benefits us evolutionarily and also help us replenish emotionally. Trust, and the feeling of connectedness acts as a protective factor against developing an addiction or other mental health conditions and increases our overall wellbeing (Buckingham et al., 2013; Jose et al., 2012).

Addiction usually has high comorbidity with other mental health conditions whose treatment informs the treatment of addiction (Schindler, 2019). Understanding the insecure attachment style is essential in addressing underlying psychological issues to help those with addiction develop functional coping mechanisms (Schindler, 2019).

The experiences of childhood trauma are not exclusive to those who develop an addiction. Many who experience trauma do not develop any mental health conditions. However, knowing about childhood trauma's effect helps us navigate through our own emotions and behaviors. We are not limited and bound to our childhood experiences; as adults, we grow, evolve and make decisions that guide the course of our lives.