

## How Childhood Trauma Can Lead to Addiction

In earlier posts, we've talked about how addiction is a complicated issue. One key factor that can contribute to addiction is childhood trauma. Trauma is a deep emotional wound caused by upsetting or damaging events. It can come from things like abuse, neglect, violence, or loss—anything that a person can't easily cope with. The effects of trauma can last a lifetime, impacting both the mind and body. People deal with trauma differently: some might recover over time, while others might struggle with anxiety, depression, or even turn to addiction as a way to cope.

Trauma and addiction are closely linked because painful experiences can leave emotional scars. When people don't know how to process those feelings, they might turn to alcohol, drugs, or other ways to numb the pain or avoid it. For example, a child who grew up in an abusive home, constantly facing verbal and physical harm, may carry that anxiety and fear well into adulthood. As they get older, they might experience panic attacks or PTSD, reliving painful memories. To cope with these overwhelming emotions, they may start drinking or using painkillers for some temporary relief. Over time, they become dependent on these substances just to get through the day, leading to addiction.

Trauma can also change the way the brain handles pleasure and motivation. For instance, a child who grew up in a neglectful home, where they were often ignored or rejected, might have trouble feeling happiness or forming connections as they grow older. Without the love and validation they needed, their brain may struggle to produce dopamine—the chemical that makes us feel good. As a teenager or adult, they might try substances like cocaine or meth, which give an intense rush of dopamine and temporarily make them feel confident, energized, or even loved. But because their brain isn't used to producing those feelings on its own, they begin to rely on the drug to feel good. Eventually, this leads to addiction, as their brain becomes dependent on that artificial high to replace the emotions they never learned to feel.

A child who grows up in a home with domestic or physical abuse, seeing violence between their parents, might feel helpless and live in constant fear of when the next violent episode will happen. Over time, this fear can turn into shame and emotional pain, leading them to feel unworthy of love or safety. They might even blame themselves for not stopping the abuse. As they get older, they might struggle with anxiety and depression, overwhelmed by emotions they can't understand or express. To numb these feelings, they might turn to prescription medications or stronger substances like heroin or even alcohol, hoping to escape their emotional turmoil. But instead of healing, they find themselves trapped in addiction, unable to process their trauma in a healthy way.

Children who grow up in homes where their parents use alcohol or drugs to cope often see this as a normal way to handle stress. If they witness their parents drinking or using substances to deal with their own pain, they may mimic that behavior as

they grow up, even if their own experiences with trauma are different. This cycle can continue across generations.

These are just a few examples, and everyone's experience with trauma is unique. Trauma changes the brain, making addiction feel like a way to survive. However, real healing happens when we face that pain and learn healthier ways to cope. That's why addiction treatment should focus on both the substance use and the trauma that caused it in the first place.