

# Complex Trauma

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## KEYWORDS

- Complex trauma • Children and adolescents • Interpersonal trauma
- Childhood victimization

## KEY POINTS

- Complex trauma exposure involves chronic/multiple traumas during developmentally vulnerable time periods.
- Exposure to complex trauma is a common occurrence for children and adolescents.
- Complex trauma exposure disrupts early attachment relationships and brain development.
- Complex trauma outcomes involve significant difficulties with emotional, behavioral, somatic, and cognitive dysregulation.

## Acronyms

ADHD	Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder
BTT	Betrayal trauma theory
DTD	Developmental trauma disorder
HPA	Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder

## INTRODUCTION

The construct of complex trauma has evolved significantly in the past 25 years. Part of the challenge with the development of this concept is that the term complex trauma has been used to refer to both the traumatic event and the unique sequelae of symptoms associated with this type of trauma. One of the earliest attempts to delineate the concept of complex trauma was attempted by Terr<sup>1</sup> who differentiated type I and type II traumas. According to this model, type I traumas tend to be single events resulting in symptoms more closely aligned with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), whereas

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type II traumas tend to be repeated, long-standing events that may present with a range of symptoms including denial, dissociation, rage, self-destructive behavior, and unremitting sadness.

The definition of complex traumatic experiences has evolved into one that refers to severe events that tend to be chronic and undermine a child's personality development and fundamental trust in relationships.<sup>2</sup> Building from this characterization, a complex traumatic event has been further defined as a traumatic event that is repetitive and occurs over an extended period of time, undermines primary caregiving relationships, and occurs at sensitive times with regard to brain development. Complex trauma events vary widely and include physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, exposure to community violence, and medical trauma. The lack of consensus on a definition of complex trauma has posed challenges for researchers because definitions can have varying emphasis placed on the number of traumatic events, the types of traumatic events, the developmental periods in which they occur, or the resulting symptom profile.<sup>3</sup>

The term complex trauma is also used to refer to the unique pattern of symptoms associated with this type of experience. Research has struggled to identify the sequelae of complex trauma; however, it has consistently identified that the impact of complex trauma is distinctive compared with more acute traumas.<sup>2,4-6</sup> Domains of impairment associated with complex trauma exposure may include deficits in relationships and attachment, emotional and behavioral dysregulation, cognitive/attentional deficits, and biological changes that may affect physical health. Further, symptoms such as dissociation, changes to self-perception, and overall shifts in beliefs about the world are frequently seen among youth who have experienced complex trauma.<sup>7</sup>

Delineating the construct of complex trauma both from the perspective of defining the traumatic event as well as its resulting sequelae is important to further research efforts and to avoid unnecessary pathologizing of traumatized children. Even more importantly, fully understanding the impact of complex trauma on children will best facilitate clinicians' ability to enhance protective factors and develop treatment interventions to help children recover.

### ***Complex Trauma Prevalence***

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Given the dual definitions of complex trauma, the prevalence of complex trauma can be thought of in 2 ways. First, it can refer to the frequency of exposure to complex traumatic experiences. Second, it can refer to the frequency of complex trauma outcomes in response to such exposure.

#### ***Prevalence of complex traumatic events***

Exposure to repetitive or multiple forms of victimization is common in childhood. Finkelhor and colleagues<sup>4</sup> found that 22% of a nationally representative sample of 2030 children aged 2 to 17 years had experienced 4 or more different forms of victimization in the past year. Victimization was broadly defined to include exposure to violent and property crime (eg, assault, theft), child welfare violations (eg, child abuse), warfare/civil disturbances, and bullying. The same researchers<sup>8</sup> conducted a screening of lifetime exposure to victimization in a nationally representative sample of 4053 youth aged 2 to 17 years. Almost 66% of the sample had been exposed to more than 1 form of victimization, 30% had been exposed to 5 or more types of victimization, and 10% had experienced 11 or more.

Polyvictimization can also start at a young age. For example, in the Turner and colleagues<sup>8</sup> study, 40% of polyvictims were younger than 13 years of age. A study of

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