Childhood Trauma and Its Effects throughout the Lifespan: An Autoethnographic Reflection of Trauma

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Abstract

Personal trauma is often a difficult topic to share. This paper is an autoethnographic reflection of personal trauma and its impact on physically and psychologically health. The trauma theory was used as a theoretical framework to help explain components of trauma and its impact. My life is a textbook example of trauma and its effects. Trauma’s effects can have such a negative impact, but it is how we choose to handle trauma that defines people. However, it can form us and shape us to be resilient and a beacon of hope for others. I desire to bridge the gap between childhood trauma and its effects and finding joy after overcoming the harsh events of life. Throughout my journey with trauma, I have discovered how to be resilient and triumph over negative experiences.

Keywords: childhood trauma, resilience through trauma, shame in the midst of trauma, autoethnography

Introduction

Trauma is a word that is not often discussed but can have a serious impact on the life of an individual. “Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (SAMHSA, 2019). Trauma can have lasting effects on an individual especially if it is experienced during childhood. In order for childhood development to go smoothly, it is vital that there be as few traumatic experiences as possible. There are several issues in psychological attachment, health, growth, and so much more that could occur throughout the lifespan if trauma occurs during childhood development (De Bellis et al., 2015). Trauma can be seen in many different forms and it affects every individual differently. It is important that the traumatic experience be addressed right away. If the trauma of the event is suppressed, it is only the beginning to several issues that could very well occur across the lifespan (De Bellis et al., 2015).

Childhood trauma can have a serious impact on the development and health of the victim. There are several outcomes that could take place. Depending on the trauma, the ability to form close relationships, problems in school, problems sleeping, and more could very well occur (Hughes, 2007). Physical symptoms might also take place over time such as, asthma, attention deficit disorders, depression, increased risk of stroke, and increased risk in heart issues (Buss, et al., 2015). Trauma is not something that can be overlooked and it is not something that can just be expected to go away (CSAT, 2014).

My story begins in a small home in rural, south Georgia. I was a happy-spirited child full of joy and life. However, my home was not. My childhood quickly turned upside down when I began realizing the environment I was in. My father established early on that I was not wanted by him and created an extremely damaging environment full of verbal and emotional abuse and neglect. My mother was the only person I clung to for support. She loved and cared for me and if it had not been for her, things could have been much worse for me. At age 14, things took a turn for the worse. My father began physically abusing me and depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts quickly began to drift into my life. I isolated myself and withdrew from society. I began self-harming and developed a destructive environment on top of all that was going on with my father. Traumatic experiences caused me to make some painful decisions in my life and shifted how I viewed life and lived it as well. A series of health-related issues began to take place in my life that I will further explain throughout the duration of this paper. My experiences have shaped me into who I am today and I would not change any of the pain I
went through. I have no regrets. I do not wish what I went through upon anyone else, but I know that I would not be who I am today without the negative experiences I have gone through. There are numerous ways that childhood trauma can affect a person throughout the lifespan and I plan to use my experiences as an example throughout the duration of this paper. By providing vivid examples and extensive research through the use of autoethnographic methods, I hope to prove that childhood trauma can have a serious effect on development and health of the victim throughout one’s life.

**Theoretical Framework**

Bessel van der Kolk’s work in trauma is used to ground my theoretical framework to best explain the events and effects of trauma throughout the duration of this autoethnography. van der Kolk’s understanding of trauma was influenced by the ideas of Jean Martin Charcot, a French physician who worked with traumatized women at Salpertriere Hospital during the late 19th century. In his research, Charcot “noted that traumatic events could induce a hypnotic state in his patients and was the first to “describe both the problems of suggestibility in these patients, and the fact that hysterical attacks are dissociative problems— the results of having endured unbearable experiences” (van der Kolk, Weisaeth, & van der Hart, 1996). According to these theorists, “traumatization that occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threat. The way we think, the way we learn, the way we remember things, the way we feel about ourselves, the way we feel about other people, and the way we make sense of the world are all profoundly altered by traumatic experience” (SafePlace, 2017). These ideas can explain how trauma can affect all aspects of life. The use of these views as theoretical framework will lay the foundation for my autoethnographic research as I dig deeper into the meaning of trauma and how it has impacted my life both positively and negatively.

**Biblical Foundation**

Throughout the Bible, there are numerous examples of traumatic events and its impact on those affected. One epitomistic example of this is David’s life. His psalms and laments are evidence of the pain and turmoil he experienced due to traumatic events that happened in his life. Psalm 13:1-2 paints a vivid example of the pain that David endured: “How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” (New International Version, 2016). He is asking the Lord a series of questions and pleading with Him to take away the pain. David faced many trials in his life, yet his faith in the Lord never faltered. We overcome those trials through Christ alone. He is our comforter and strength in times of need. James states in his writings that we should always “consider it joy” when we are facing trials (NIV, 2016). Trauma and pain are bound to enter into our lives at some point. Resilience is achieved when we recognize the Almighty One who has already overcome our situation. We are powerless and unable to do anything apart from Him. My journey with trauma would have ended very differently if I had not come to know Christ when I did. His hand is always in our lives intricately weaving together our story. Christ was and is at work in my life just as He was there for David and all the other people of the Bible who suffered.

**Autoethnography as a Method**

The method of using an autoethnography was chosen to enhance my understanding of trauma and its effects on health through the lens of my own experiences. My ability to reflect on past traumas through this method has helped me to produce a personalized account and to better understand my past. Tamas (2009) explains, “I have been taught that the right thing to do when confronted with trauma and loss is to recover. Doing so often involves using our painful experiences as a source of learning, growth, or activist survivor mission.” Searching the innermost and darkest parts of myself and using it as a tool to learn has truly helped me in overcoming my trauma. Vasconcelos articulates the benefits of using autoethnography as, “a merger between autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography highlights the researcher and her own reflexivity and reflections as viable data sources in a given study” (as cited in Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008). An autoethnography meshes the autobiography and memoir together to create the perfect storyline and to facilitate research understanding. This method underscores my main theme of searching the depths of my memory and applying intense research to my recollections in order to get a better grasp on the health issues I experienced (Vasconcelos, 2011). The autoethnography was the best method because it would aid in answering the questions I had about my adverse childhood experiences and allow me to dig deeper into the topic of trauma itself. It also helped to answer my questions on shame and overcoming such feelings. Some researchers believe that trauma is best overcome through the art of writing it out and expressing it through art as therapy instead of speaking through counseling (Ellerby, 2005).
Others use autoethnographies as a form of treatment or therapy that “challenges Western clinical protocols to address trauma” head on (McMillan & Ramirez, 2016). Examining my experiences closely will help me develop better understanding of my identity and who I am today in light of the issues I have experienced.

Jones (2008) states, “autoethnography, after all, also means setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation ... and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives” (44-45). This definition gives a perfect understanding for those who choose to use autoethnography as a method. My intent behind using this method is to allow my readers to acquire better understanding of who I am by unraveling my story and teaching them more about trauma through extensive self-examination through the lens of an autoethnography. I hope to show my readers that there is resilience in uncovering the truths of trauma and accepting that adverse experiences occurred. Giorgio (2008) explains that she experienced much of the same in her journey of uncovering the depths of her trauma. Even though those experiences occurred, she was able to learn from them. With pain and trauma, brings shame and questions. However, with questions, there are almost always answers as long as one is willing to search. My expectation is that through my findings for answers, there is hope instilled in those who see my story unravel and open hearts to those who need help in overcoming trauma. With the help of the trauma theory and far-reaching analysis of myself, this autoethnographic method will aid in providing answers to the several questions I have about myself.

My Auto-Ethnographic Album

I am Who I am Because of My Past

My journey with trauma first began when my father started verbally and emotionally abusing me at age four. He began calling me profane names and belittling me. He created an environment where I felt as if I were nothing. He did not want me and he made me aware of this fact every day. I just assumed that what I was experiencing was something that every child dealt with. He established a very tyrannical environment and made me feel as if I had to walk on pins and needles in my own home. He would call me names and make me feel worthless. Nothing I did was ever good enough for him. I could perform a chore to the best of my ability, and he would still find something wrong with everything I did. He would hit walls and slam things around me when he expressed his malice. There was not a day that went by in which he did not yell at me and make me feel less than. In my research, I discovered that verbal abuse is often overlooked but can have serious effects on a person, especially a child. Streep (2016) said, “We respond more deeply and quickly to criticism than to praise, for example, and remember the deflating or wounding remark with more exactness than the compliment. This applies to children as well as adults.” Streep went on to explain whether or not having love and praise from one parent could somehow balance out the negative, damaging words of another parent. She came to the conclusion that negative words are much more likely to be remembered than the positive (Streep, 2016). Her research rang true in my life undoubtedly. I never felt safe and I felt as if I had to hide from everyone in my life because I was so ashamed of who I was. These experiences continued until I was 13 years old and then things began to worsen.

At age 14, physical abuse became a normal part of life for me. This inhumane and monstrous act took me by surprise and broke me. My first experience with this form of abuse happened one day after school. My father had discovered the granola bars I had hidden in my room. I lied and told him I didn’t know what he was talking about and it escalated to a serious screaming match. He then proceeded to move closer and closer until I was backed into the corner of my bedroom wall. He threatened to hit me and before I could even wrap my mind around what was going on, he slapped me across the face. In that moment, my world was flipped upside down and I was forever changed. The shame of what I was experiencing caused me to cower and hide behind the mask of a smile. I didn’t want anyone to know what I was going through because I was so ashamed of the person I had become. Figure 1 shows the unraveling of shame and its effects on an abuse victim (see figure 1). My shame began as a result of the trauma I endured. From there, it led to fear, anger, disgust, and distress. Shame is often times a direct result of trauma and abuse (Andrews, 1998). These emotions became catalysts for me to hide from others, attack myself, and hide from my problems. Depression started as a result of attacking myself and the way I felt about myself.
As a result of my shame and hiding, depression and anxiety took a serious stronghold in my life. Hughes (2007) states that “The sense of shame that develops from experiences of complex trauma quickly becomes core to a young person's identity.” It became quickly evident that I viewed myself according to my shame. I saw myself as what I had endured as opposed to seeing myself for who I actually was. Suicidal thoughts and destructive behavior followed not too long after. For three years beginning at age 14, I struggled to see my purpose in life, began self-harming, and even attempted suicide. I was introduced to the idea of self-harm on an app called Tumblr. I read that it apparently releases endorphins and aids in helping a depressed mind feel “better.” As seen in the above diagram, I became addicted to the feeling of self-inflicted pain. Shame is often dealt with in very negative ways, including self-harm (Chapman et al., 2006). I felt as if I deserved the pain because I was so disgusted with myself.

When victims experience trauma, they will seek coping mechanisms when the external threat is too much to handle even if it is not necessarily the best option (Van der Kolk, 1996). At this point in my life, I longed and desired to feel nothing. I didn’t feel like my life had any purpose and I didn’t feel like anyone needed me either. I began contemplating suicide and eventually came to the conclusion that I would be doing the people in my life a service if I just left, especially my father. Suicide ideation is a known, leading side effect to childhood trauma (Bahk, et. al. 2017). However, the relationship between trauma and suicide ideation is somewhat unclear. More times than not, anxiety, depression, and lack of social support are often factors that occur after abuse or childhood trauma has occurred. Bahk et al. (2017) sought out to prove that when abuse occurs, suicide ideation is more common than not. A sense of helplessness and powerlessness overcomes the victim and the mind fools them into believing that there is nothing left to live for.

When I was 14, the results of trauma in my life began to impact my health. Aside from mental disorders and abnormal health symptoms, physical symptoms also began to occur. I started experiencing serious abdominal pain and nausea after every meal. This is something that I still struggle with today even almost seven years later. Chronic health issues related to stress have been known to be tied to a traumatic event or series of events occurring throughout the lifespan (W, D Andrea, 2011). Symptoms such as stomach issues can be a result of anxiety or stress. Even though I was not diagnosed with a specific condition, these symptoms began occurring at the time of serious trauma in my life.

When I was 15, I began to develop symptoms close to ADHD. I had always been studious in school until the trauma began to take full form in my life. I had serious difficulty focusing in classes, I could not sit still, and my mind would wander at random times. Teachers and peers would try and get my attention and I wouldn’t even hear them calling my name until minutes later. I also developed fears and serious issues with being in crowded rooms or places with numerous activities going on. I hated going to large school gatherings but doing so was still better than...
being at home. I hid all of the pain from everyone. I was so ashamed of who I had become that I couldn’t even look at myself in the mirror. Shame takes a serious stronghold on one’s life and is often a main motivator into depression (Andrews, 1998). No one knew I was being abused and no one knew what I was doing to myself. I even kept it from my own mother for years. I would avoid eye contact with almost everyone. I hid from my fellow peers and teachers worried that they might find out what was going on under the surface. I hid behind a smile and acted as if everything were fine, and no one ever questioned it.

Studies show that after a traumatic experience, there is an increased risk of disease in one’s life especially during the developmental stages of childhood. A recent study from the department of public health at Harvard University showed that “childhood trauma can dramatically increase risk for seven out of ten of the leading causes of death in the U.S. – including high blood pressure, heart disease, and cancer” (Chan, 2015). They insist on the importance of addressing this public health crisis be addressed. It is not something that can just be put on the backburner. There are several other studies such as Nadine Burke Harris’s research, as stated before, that prove this to be true. This research allows for me to be aware of my possible increased risk for certain diseases, which may alter the way my primary health physician views my profile. More importantly, those who have dealt with trauma must face these statistics head on and handle them accordingly.

In my case, I will do anything I can in order to decrease these possibilities. I may not be able to change or control what has happened to me, but I can control how I handle it by moving on with my life as full as possible. Trauma is capable of stealing life away and leaving destruction in its wake, but I am determined not to fall victim to it and be held captive to it for the rest of my life. Trauma may have been a part of my life and shaped me into who I am, but I am determined to not let it be what defines me. Self-examination of my trauma has helped me to realize that there is far greater out there than my problems. Self-examination and reflection of the trauma endured is crucial to overcoming it (Street, et.al, 2001). This is a process and it takes time, but it is not impossible. However, I am able to search the deeper parts of myself, recognize how my brain works, and what I need in order to cope and function normally. I am so grateful for what I went through because, without it, I would not be the person I am today. It has shaped my identity and formed me into the strong, hopeful woman I am now. From my childhood to my adulthood years, I have continued to grow. My past has been the main motivation in my walk with Christ and my desire to help others with my occupation in the years to come.

Conclusion

Overcoming My Trauma

For years, I struggled with overcoming what had happened to me in my childhood. I fell captive to the chains of my past and was held back by the shackles completely. From age 15 to age 17, I experienced the shame of my childhood trauma. I hid from all around me and tried my best to mask what had happened to me. I did not truly gain resilience from the shame of my trauma until well into my college career. During the summer, going into my junior year of college, I finally realized why I had gone through such trauma and gained peace in knowing that there was a purpose behind all the pain and heartbreak I had endured. I was able to share my story and what I had gone through with a girl who had been struggling with depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts for seven years. Being only 13 years old and having struggled for so long, she broke me. When I shared what I had gone through and showed her my scars, she realized she was not alone and, in that moment, I realized why I had endured all that I had for so long. Sharing our story helps us to overcome and move forward (Carless, 2015). The Lord provided for me an answer as to why I needed to go through all that pain in order to get where I am today. Although many others are going through or have gone through the same thing and it is so easy for us to feel as if we are alone in our hurt. We are led to believe as if we are the only ones going through such pain, but that is not true at all.

My trauma allowed me to realize my own strength. Duckworth (2014) did a study on grit and formed a test in order to see the correlation between adverse experiences and the strength of an individual. Trauma and stressful events either make us or break us. Duckworth’s test shows that when trauma occurs and one is able to overcome the pain of it, they are stronger and develop more grit. After taking her GRIT test, I scored a 4.30. That score is higher than 80% of the population in the United States. Her research behind this states that the more a person undergoes, the harder it is for them to give up on something. Most victims of trauma who have overcome its effects are more determined and hopeful to follow through with their goals and dreams. Giving up is not an option for me. For too long, I allowed myself to be trampled over and beat up, but I now know my worth, mostly because of my faith; if it had not
been for overcoming the traumas in my life, I would not be as strong or as resilient in today.

**Moving Forward**

There are several ways to overcome trauma and move forward in life. There are things such as medication, counseling, therapy, and others. I did not seek help to overcome my adverse childhood experiences because my father would not allow me to get aid. It is extremely crucial at the onset of trauma for it to be addressed almost immediately following something serious. In the event of childhood trauma that goes on unaddressed, it is also important to allow the victim to speak up and talk about what has gone on in their life in order to gain resilience and move forward (Burke, 2017). If not addressed, so many negative symptoms in physical and mental health can occur. Being scarred from trauma that occurred in childhood is hard to overcome and a plethora of issues can start to take place. Therapy can help and although it may be difficult to address at first, the results are so beneficial and worth it. Talking through the pain and hurt that one feels can drastically change one’s life.

The only way that I ever overcame my trauma was by speaking through it and finding hope in my Savior, Jesus Christ. I am a huge advocate for vulnerability. It is so difficult to be raw and real with others, but so much good can come from it for oneself and for others (Carless, 2015). Expressing how I felt truly helped me to recognize how I was actually feeling. Moving forward, I hope to continue to see the results of speaking out about my life experiences to help others overcome theirs. My intention is to be prepared to face trauma head on if it occurs again in my life. I plan to do so by surrounding myself with people that have a Christ-centered faith and desire to push me in my walk with Christ. Psalm 91:4-6 says, “He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday” (NIV, 2016). We do not have to fear anything that this world may try to throw at us because Christ is with us always. Overcoming my trauma has been one of the most difficult journeys, but one of the most rewarding. If it had not been for my faith in Christ, I know that I never would have overcome the strongholds Satan had on me. I owe my life to Christ for bringing me out of my pit into his marvelous light. The diagram below gives a visual representation of my journey with trauma and how I became resilient.

**My Journey to Resilience**

![Figure 1 – Trauma and Resilience](image-url)
References

CSAT. Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. (2014). Understanding the impact of trauma.