Abuse *is not* a trauma response

Misinformation about this harms trauma survivors

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The term “abusive trauma responses” isn’t a standard term used in psychology, trauma theory or trauma-informed practice.

This term is not a standard term that represents trauma-responsive practice.

The term is used to describe behaviours that are harmful to others and are believed to have developed in response to trauma. This narrative is misinformation that harms trauma survivors.

Abuse and a trauma response are two very different things.

A trauma response is an autonomic nervous system reaction that develops to help a person survive overwhelming or threatening experiences. Trauma responses are adaptive survival strategies that can persist long after the danger has passed and may include hypervigilance, dissociation, avoidance, fawning, and emotional numbing. Trauma responses often involve hurting oneself as opposed to hurting others: self-harm, suicidal ideation, substance use, gastrointestinal problems, depressive symptoms, and internal turmoil.

However, abuse involves behaviour that causes harm through patterns of coercion, intimidation, manipulation, control, exploitation, or violence. In some instances, like child sexual abuse, the abuse is carefully planned and premeditated.

One causes harm, the other has been harmed.

For example:

- "I become overwhelmed when I am yelled at" describes a trauma-related reaction.
- "I threaten my partner when criticised because of my trauma" describes abusive behaviour.

This frames abuse as a symptom rather than a choice or pattern of behaviour for which accountability is required.

If abuse is routinely framed as a trauma response, it can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes that traumatised people are dangerous or likely to harm others. This can be especially problematic because trauma survivors are statistically more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators.

Equating trauma with abusiveness can itself be harmful to survivors, because it reinforces a stereotype that people who have been harmed are likely to become perpetrators.

What impact can this framing have on communities?

- Pathologise survivors.
- Create fear around traumatised people.
- Shift attention away from accountability for abuse.
- Suggest abuse is an inevitable consequence of victimisation.
- Medicalises abuse.
- Treats abuse as a symptom rather than a behaviour.

Trauma may explain why someone struggles with emotional regulation, trust, or relationships. It does not explain away coercion, intimidation, manipulation, violence, or abuse.

What the research actually shows:

Current research suggests childhood abuse during the developmental years may produce an increased risk of perpetrating violence in adulthood, but it does not conclude that trauma causes abuse or that most trauma survivors become abusive. Researchers explicitly discuss risk factors and pathways rather than inevitability (Curtis et al., 2023; Toumbourou et al., 2016).

A recent review of intergenerational violence research concluded that the pathway from childhood victimisation to later perpetration is mediated by multiple mechanisms rather than being a direct cause-and-effect relationship (Meinck et al., 2025).

A systematic review and meta-analysis of prospective studies found that childhood maltreatment can modestly increase the likelihood of later violent outcomes, but most children who experience maltreatment do not go on to commit serious violence (Fitton et al., 2020).

Earlier discussions in the literature focused heavily on understanding the perpetrator's trauma history. More recent survivor-centred approaches place greater emphasis on:

- victim-survivor safety
- accountability of perpetrators
- power and control dynamics
- and prevention of future harm

Researchers discuss how services have historically focused on what victims-survivors should do to stay safe and recover, while placing less emphasis on accountability practices directed at perpetrators. They argue that more effective responses require locating responsibility with the person causing the violence and addressing the broader systems that enable it (Heward-Belle & Hughes, 2026).

survivors are statistically more likely to experience further victimisation than to become perpetrators themselves. Research on childhood adversity often finds that trauma predicts later vulnerability and revictimisation as well as, or more strongly than, perpetration (Curtis et al., 2023).

Contemporary trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches emphasise understanding the impact of trauma while maintaining accountability for harm and avoiding narratives that equate victimisation with perpetration.

References:

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