Trauma and Children: A Hero’s Journey

Brandi Hawk, PhD
WHO DO YOU THINK OF AS A “HERO”? 

HOW MANY OF THESE HEROES HAD EASY LIVES?

In your words...
The Hero’s Journey

- **PROTAGONIST LIVES A NORMAL LIFE**
- **SOMETHING TERRIBLE OR WONDERFUL HAPPENS**
- **PROTAGONIST LEAVES**
- **PROTAGONIST CONFRONTS & OVERCOMES OBSTACLES**
- **PROTAGONIST IS REWARDED & STARTS A NEW LIFE**

Trauma is central to the hero’s journey.

What is Trauma?

• An EVENT
  • EXPERIENCED as distressing or overwhelming
  • That has an EFFECT on functioning

- Medical
- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Emotional Abuse
- Verbal Abuse
- Witness Interpersonal Violence
- Animal Attack
- Natural Disaster
- Personal Disaster
- Death or Separation of a Loved One
- Exploitation
- Persecution
- Deportation
- Parental Incarceration
- Parental Substance Abuse
- Discrimination
- Bullying
- Community Violence
- Witness an Arrest
- So much more…
Trauma affects the body

• Our bodies are made to deal with stressful, life-threatening, or scary events. Like all animals, we respond with an automatic natural instinct:

  - **Fight**: Aggressive behavior, irritability
  - **Flight**: Hides, leaves, and runs away
  - **Freeze**: shuts down. Checks out.
  - **Appease**: People pleasing. Befriends/Praises to avoid conflict.

• The body’s responses to stress and trauma are normal. Toxic stress and trauma keep our bodies stuck in these responses.
Trauma affects beliefs

VIEW OF SELF
- I'm a bad kid
- Isolated
- Guilt and Responsibility
- Unlovable

VIEW OF OTHERS
- Others will hurt me
- Others cannot be trusted
- No one can keep me safe
- I have to hurt others before they hurt me

VIEW OF THE WORLD
- The world is a dangerous place
- The world is unpredictable
- I am alone in the world
- I am unsafe
Trauma Affects Behaviors

That are hard to manage

- Reactivity to trauma cues
- Reenacting
- Flashbacks/dissociation
- Tantrums/aggression
- Hyperactivity
- Angry mood
- Sexual behaviors
Trauma Affects Behaviors

That impact relationships

- Withdrawal
- Anhedonia
- Negative mood
- Avoidance
- Clinginess
- Saying mean things
Impact of Childhood Trauma

Cognition
- Impaired readiness to learn
- Difficulty problem-solving
- Language delays
- Problems with concentration
- Poor academic achievement

Brain development
- Smaller brain size
- Less efficient processing
- Impaired stress response
- Changes in gene expression

Physical health
- Sleep disorders
- Eating disorders
- Poor immune system functioning
- Cardiovascular disease
- Shorter life span

Emotions
- Difficulty controlling emotions
- Trouble recognizing emotions
- Limited coping skills
- Increased sensitivity to stress
- Shame and guilt
- Excessive worry, hopelessness
- Feelings of helplessness/lack of self-efficacy

Behavior
- Poor self-regulation
- Social withdrawal
- Aggression
- Poor impulse control
- Risk-taking/illegal activity
- Sexual acting out
- Adolescent pregnancy
- Drug and alcohol misuse

Mental health
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Negative self-image/low self-esteem
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Suicidality

Relationships
- Attachment problems/disorders
- Poor understanding of social interactions
- Difficulty forming relationships with peers
- Problems in romantic relationships
- Intergenerational cycles of abuse and neglect
# The Triple Trauma Paradigm

## Country of Origin
- Violence & death
- War
- Persecution
- Loss & grief
- Fear

"It's a really difficult situation [in Afghanistan] for boys that are 15 or 16," he said. "They [armed groups] can just come and say you need to be a soldier. If you say no, they can kill you." ~Jakey (savethechildren.org)

## In Transition
- Fleeing home
- Fear of persecution
- Unknown dangers
- Conditions in camps
- Trauma in transportation
- Lack of stability

It was so cold outside, that the puddles surrounding the leaking tents where 14-year old Azar and other Afghan refugees slept had frozen over. Despite the dire conditions at the refugee camp in Croatia, he remembered the mountainous journey as being even more dangerous. "Fear is constant in the mountains," he said. "There were also wolves. That's the scary part." ~Azar (savethechildren.org)

## Host Country
- Acculturation stress
- Xenophobia & discrimination
- Pressure for self-sufficiency
- Grief & loss
- Fear of deportation

Rohina [...] recalls being frightened after getting stuck on an escalator in the airport. She had never been on one before. She says that fear was replicated throughout her childhood and teen years as she faced bullying, family financial hardships and depression. (cnn.com - ‘We’re here to help you.’ What Afghan Americans want refugees fleeing the Taliban to know)

How can so much pain become a story of hope?
MULTIFINALITY & EQUIFINALITY
The Hero’s Journey

- Protagonist lives a normal life
- Something terrible or wonderful happens
- Protagonist leaves
- Protagonist is rewarded & starts a new life
- Protagonist confronts & overcomes obstacles
- Family, cultural, or supernatural beliefs provide strength & direction
- Learn new skills

Help from friends and wise advisors

Protective factors are interventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supportive caregiver(s)</th>
<th>Close friend(s)</th>
<th>Comforting beliefs</th>
<th>Positive school experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring teacher(s)</td>
<td>Good neighbors</td>
<td>Supportive adult</td>
<td>Opportunities for fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>Predictable routine</td>
<td>Cultural beliefs &amp; activities</td>
<td>Community support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finding the hero’s journey

• All refugee children have experienced multiple complex traumas
• Trauma affects all aspects of a child’s life
  • That does NOT have to be their story
• All good heroes experience trauma
  • What is this child’s story?
  • Where is their hero’s journey leading?
  • How is their trauma affecting their body, beliefs, and behaviors in this chapter?
  • What protective factors do they have and need to make it through this part of the story?
thank you

Brandi Hawk
bhawk@ucdavis.edu