

10 Things You Didn't Know Were Trauma Responses



[SHENANDOAH CHEFALO](#) 6 HOURS AGO

Recognizing trauma responses is an important skill for trauma-informed leaders to learn—and knowing these common trauma responses is a great place to start. When we view the world with a trauma-informed lens, we can identify two distinct states of mind or headspaces. Of course, this is an overly simplified model—but it can help us easily identify when someone (including ourselves) is experiencing a trauma response.

These two states of mind are “trauma brain” and “executive functioning brain.” When we’re in a trauma state, we cannot access our executive functioning skills, meaning we will fail to think about the future, struggle to plan or organize, and lack logical reasoning.

When we’re in a trauma state, we’re more likely to experience emotional reasoning, black-and-white thinking, and other cognitive distortions.



Recognizing Trauma States at Work

Learning how to recognize trauma states can be helpful in both your personal and professional life because it allows us to see certain interpersonal challenges as trauma-based or experience-based rather than problem-based.

For example, if you have a team member who is consistently difficult to work with, it can be easy to think of them as the problem. With a trauma-informed lens, we acknowledge that they, too, are struggling to access their executive functioning skills because they are frequently experiencing trauma brain. The solution then shifts from “how can we deal with them” to “how can we help them get out of this state of mind.”

When we explore these self-destructive behaviors, we can learn to view them as learned trauma responses. This approach can help us to be more understanding, compassionate, and empathetic as we move toward healing.

10 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW WERE
TRAUMA RESPONSES
FROM CHEFALO CONSULTING

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SHUTTING
DOWN.

PEOPLE PLEASING.

WALKING
AWAY.

GETTING DEFENSIVE.

PLAYING
THE VICTIM.

EMOTIONAL NUMBNESS.

KEEPING
BUSY.

DISSOCIATION.

PLAYING THE
PERSECUTOR.

HYPER-INDEPENDENCE.

1 - People pleasing

The classic trauma responses you probably know are fight and flight. But there are two other common ones: freeze and appease.

The appease trauma response can look like agreement, being helpful, or stepping up as a leader. All of these behaviors can be positive, especially in a professional setting, but people pleasing is ultimately detrimental to the individual and their team.

When someone is in the trauma state of appeasement, they might communicate agreement but internally disagree. Appeasement can prevent us from speaking up for what we believe in, voicing concerns, and asking for help.

The appease trauma response arises when someone has a past experience where taking care of others ensured self-preservation. These experiences could come

from childhood, but that's not always the case. They could also come from past or current friendships and relationships or previous professional settings.

If you're familiar with the reenactment triangle or the drama triangle, people pleasing can signal that someone is playing the "rescuer" role.

2 - Getting defensive

When we think of the fight survival response, we probably imagine someone who's ready to get in a physical fight. However, our fight response often reveals itself as defensiveness, especially at work.

Consider a hypothetical employee who is always closed off to suggestions and strongly resists change. Coworkers might describe this person as stubborn, hardheaded, or indignant. During disagreements, they may struggle to listen to what has been said or raise their voice.

All of these so-called personality traits may actually be trauma responses.

3 - Walking away

Flight is another common trauma response that we might associate with drastic behavior. Often, our flight response triggers feelings of anxiety or fear.

For some, a flight response can feel like a strong desire to leave the situation. That desire can translate into walking away from a conversation or a meeting.

Without a trauma-informed perspective, we might respond to this situation by saying, "That behavior was completely inappropriate!" Then, we might schedule a meeting to reprimand this person. This method is correction with no connection.

With a trauma-informed perspective, we can say, "Wow, that person must have felt very unsafe to behave this way." With the connection before correction model, we can establish a connection through an open, honest, and safe conversation before discussing the future.

4 - Shutting down

When someone freezes as a trauma response, they often struggle to think. Their mind may go completely blank, and they won't know what to say.

This situation can be frustrating for both parties. The person on the other side of this trauma response might feel like they're talking to a wall. They might assume that the other person is indifferent to the topic or feel pushed aside.

But it can also be challenging for the person who's struggling to think and speak. As they're shutting down, they might feel confused or angry that their words and thoughts are not coming to them.

5 - Emotional numbness

While some people may experience trauma brain as an absence of thoughts or words, others can experience an absence of emotions. Emotional numbness, low emotional intelligence, and a lack of emotional awareness can all come from traumatic experiences where embracing emotions could be unsafe.

When you or someone you know struggles to get in touch with their emotions, it's important to use a trauma-informed lens which sees this as a natural response to past experiences rather than a personal failure, flaw, or deficit.

6 - Dissociation

Dissociation is a trauma response that causes us to feel disconnected from ourselves. This can include feeling disconnected from our emotions and experiences, struggling to remember our past, or having a sense that the world around us is unreal.

Dissociation is one of the most common trauma responses, and it can last for a few minutes, a few days, or a few weeks. In some cases, lasting dissociation can be a sign of a dissociative condition.

While dissociation can help us survive traumatic experiences, it can become a maladaptive coping mechanism, especially when it prevents us from being present.

7 - Playing the victim

Reenactment is another common trauma response, and one of the roles we might take on during a reenactment is the victim.

The victim trauma response is the voice of helplessness. It says, "Poor me! There's nothing I can do." Victims often refuse to acknowledge their role in creating their own circumstances, shedding any responsibility as they lean into feelings of hopelessness, dejection, and shame.

When someone is stuck in a victim mentality, they struggle to make decisions and acknowledge the power they do have.

8 - Hyper-independence

On the flip side of being hyper-dependent on others, hyper-independence can be another trauma response. Most of us can relate to the struggle of asking for help. Hyper-independence takes that fear of relying on others to the next level.

Someone who is hyper-independent will rarely or never ask for help. And while we may pride ourselves on being self-reliant, hyper-independence can prevent us from being vulnerable with others and forming genuine relationships.

Hyper-independence and resistance to relying on others often arise after we've experienced situations where we needed help from others, and they weren't there for us. Our brains now expect people to not be there to support us, so we shut down the chance for support before someone else can.

9 - Constantly keeping busy

To do trauma-informed work, you need to be self-aware, and our self-aware moments often come to us when we are still and quiet.

For some people, those quiet and still moments are flooded with negative thoughts rather than self-awareness. To cope with those thoughts, they keep themselves busy.

Distraction can be a great coping mechanism for short-term distress, but avoidance can become a maladaptive coping mechanism. When we are constantly busy, rarely stop to rest, and have TV and music on to fill the silence in our lives, busyness is a trauma response.

At work, you may know someone who is constantly pushing ahead to the next project. They rarely stop to take breaks and are always cognizant of how little time they seem to have. Instead of seeing this person as a problem, we can see how their trauma response is to stay busy—and we can support them as they heal.

10 - Playing the persecutor

The persecutor is another role that we can take on during reenactments. The persecutor is the voice of blame and shame. They are harsh critics who set rigid rules to impose control over situations where they believe they are the authority figure. In the office, the persecutors are bullies.

While it's easy to put the blame and shame on the persecutor, the trauma-informed approach tells us that this is their trauma response. When they feel unsafe, they need to exert control. The consequences of this trauma response are that they cannot be flexible or open-minded, they struggle to solve problems, and they harm their relationships.

Being a persecutor is unpleasant for those around them—but it's also unpleasant to be the persecutor.

Recognizing Trauma Responses Can Help Us Be More Understanding

The trauma-informed model allows us to use a lens of compassion, kindness, and understanding. By viewing problematic, unhelpful, or self-sabotaging behaviors as trauma-based, we can unpack our motivations for acting or thinking in a certain way and begin to heal from our trauma through change and growth.

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