

The Long-Term Effects of Childhood Trauma: A Historical and Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the lasting effects that childhood trauma could have on an individual over time. It specifically focuses on the effects of isolation and difficulties in concentrating. While isolation usually derives from the detachment of society that is used as coping mechanism, the difficulties in concentrating derive from a poor development of the amygdala, hippocampus and prefrontal cortex regions of the brain, while children are coping with trauma. These coping mechanisms vary on whether the child is facing type I or type II traumas. The essay also provides a historical framework for the cases of trauma in the United States. In this regard, the case of Mary Ellen Wilson was key, since there were no laws in the United States that protected children against abuse. The essay will, specifically, delve into how the view of children and parenting shifted from considering children an "object" (Doraphy) to more modern views and how this shift led to a change of child abuse in the USA legal system.

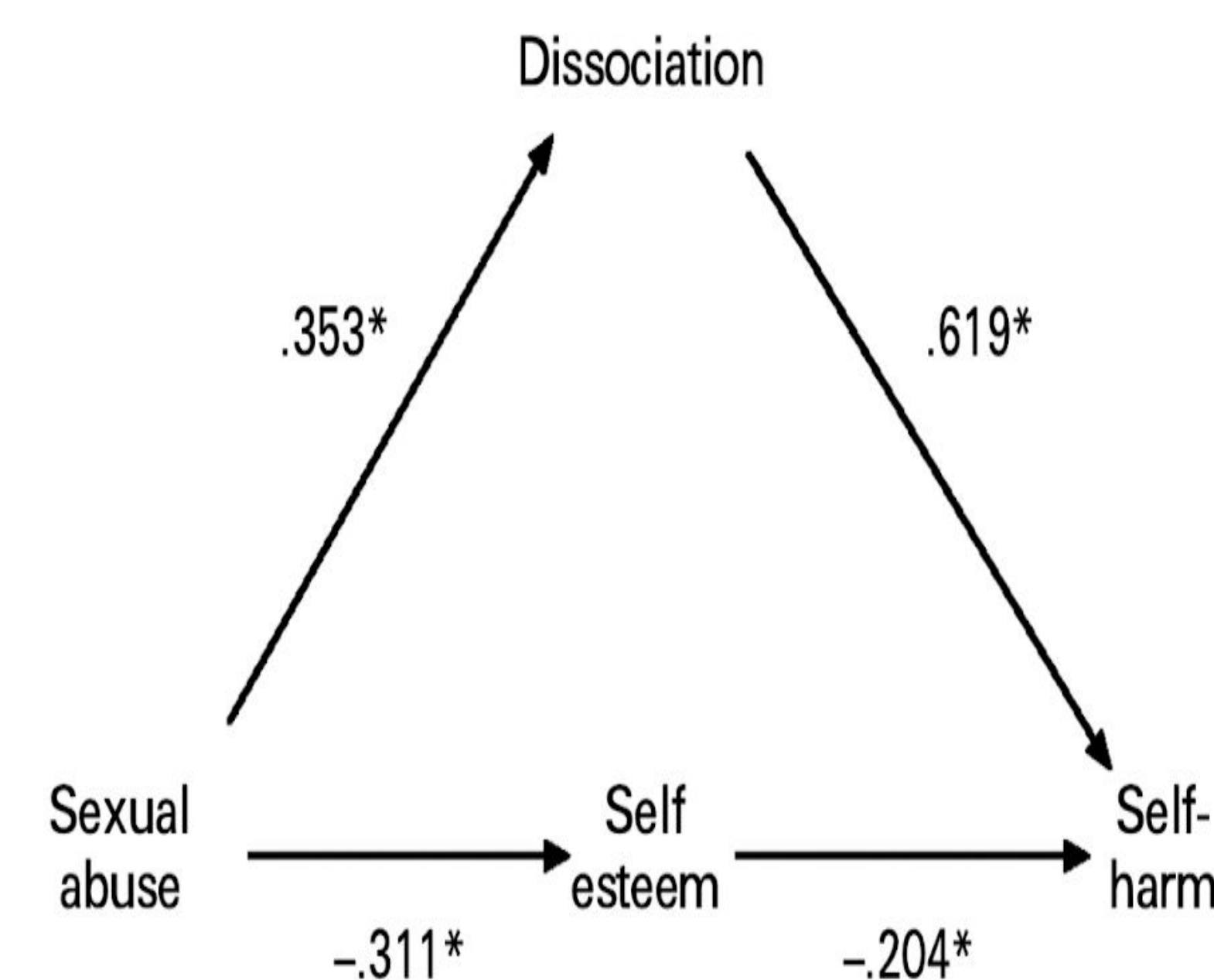
Isolation

- Trust is fundamental for human connections. Without it, fear resulting from trauma can lead to isolation as individuals seek to avoid emotional harm (Tanasugarn). Difficulty in forming intimate connections due to distrust reinforces this isolation.
- Trauma's lasting impact on social skills and self-esteem can further contribute to "feelings of inadequacy," solidifying the belief that isolation is preferable to navigating complex relationships (Sandars).
- A lack of communication could cause **physical harm** as people resort to **extreme measures**.

Historical perspective

DeMause introduced the "Six Modes of Parenting," as documented by Doraphy. The first mode, termed "infanticide," depicted children as objects of sacrifice or even sexual exploitation. Childhood trauma began to be recognized in the 19th century with the transition to the "socializing" mode, characterized by an emphasis on instructing children differently, where discipline was balanced with guidance. A pivotal moment in altering societal perceptions of child maltreatment and trauma occurred with the landmark case of Mary Ellen Wilson in the United States during April 1874. Wilson, an orphan adopted by Thomas and Mary McCormack, faced severe abuse from Mary McCormack following her husband's death. Despite the absence of legal frameworks for addressing child abuse at the time, concerned neighbors such as Etta Angell Wheeler advocated for Wilson's protection, asserting that humans are part of the animal kingdom and thus subject to similar standards of care. This case catalyzed action, leading figures such as Bergh, Gerry, and philanthropist John D. Wright established the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in December 1874, as chronicled by Markel.

Figure 1a. Path analysis showing the impact of early sexual abuse on current self-harm. Values on paths indicated by * are standardized regression coefficients significant at $p < .05$.



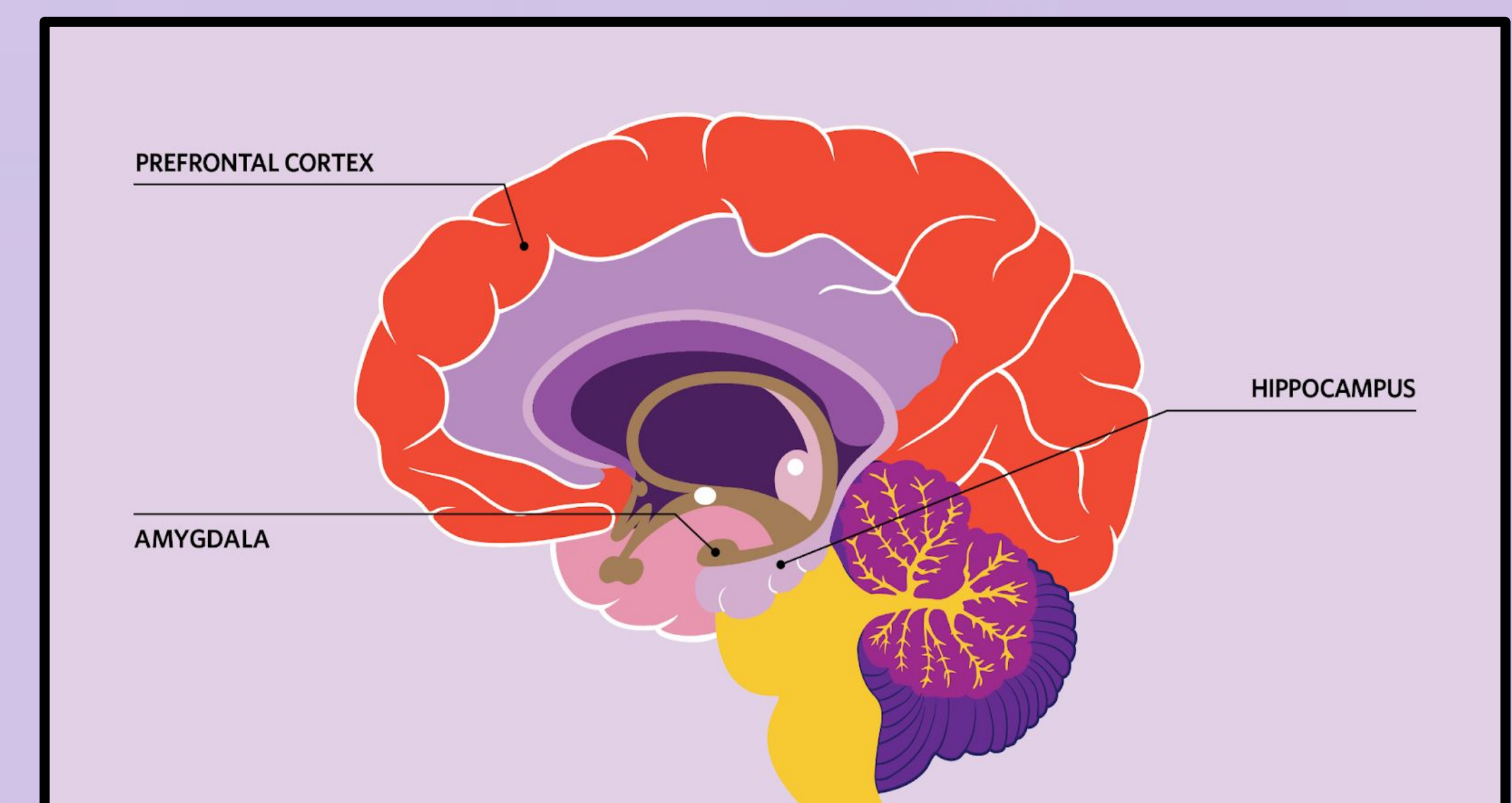
"Now I have two black and blue marks on my head that mom made with the whip, and a cut on the left side of my forehead that mom made with a pair of scissors in her hand.... I never dared to talk to anyone, because if I did she would beat me" (Markel, 2).

Trauma Type 1 vs Type 2

- Type I trauma pertains to a singular traumatic event experienced by an individual during their lifetime.
- This form of trauma is often identified by the individual's attempt to rationalize the occurrence through notions of "omens," seeking to comprehend the event's significance or purpose, often leading to feelings of guilt or a shift in perception.
- Conversely, Type II trauma involves recurrent traumatic experiences throughout an individual's life, prompting the development of enduring coping mechanisms.
- These coping mechanisms can persist over extended durations, shaping an individual's response to subsequent traumas.
- Examples would be "repression, dissociation, difficulty in concentration, and changes in personality" (Terr, 328).

Difficulty in Concentration

- Affected mostly by biological aspects of the brain:
 - **The amygdala**, vital for survival, is implicated in the formation of conditioned fear, leading to hypervigilance and anxiety in trauma survivors (Bessel, 13). An overactive amygdala can hinder relaxation and diminish enjoyment of life by perpetuating anxiety.
 - Traumatic experiences can impair cognitive function by **affecting the hippocampus**, as elevated levels of glucocorticoids like cortisol have been associated with learning disabilities and hippocampal damage (Bessel, 13). Reductions in hippocampal size due to trauma may consequently impede academic performance and learning abilities.
 - **The prefrontal cortex** plays a critical role in processing information and generating solutions based on prior knowledge, while also influencing memory development. However, its vulnerability to misinterpretation of information can impact various cognitive functions such as "organization, planning, memory, and appropriate responses," (Bessel).



Important to note:

- The lasting effects of trauma endure within individuals, offering no definitive resolution, yet awareness of these effects can lessen their impact over time. Childhood trauma is not something that you can completely forget about, but you have to recognize it and learn how to live with it without it affecting you negatively.