

The Impact of Developmental Trauma on Human Evolution

Janae B. Weinhold, PhD & Barry K. Weinhold, PhD

Abstract: This article presents an expanded paradigm for understanding the pervasive impact of subtle parent-child interactions that cause experiences of shock, trauma, and stress during the first three years of life. Drawn from quantitative, qualitative, applied evidence-based practice, case formulation research methods, and a comprehensive review of related research, it uses the term “developmental trauma” to describe these early experiences. The article also places shock, trauma, and stress on a continuum and charts their impact on the development of individuals, couples, and families. It also describes the Weinholds’ clinical model for healing developmental trauma.

Key Words: Developmental trauma, developmental shock, developmental stress, developmental process work, trauma continuum

Introduction

Some years ago during a seminar led by Dr. Arnold Mindell in Zurich, Switzerland he said, “If you can dream something, it’s already happening.” This simple, but profound statement stuck with us as we examined how to heal the long-term effects of early developmental shocks, traumas, and stresses on our own relationship.

We began our personal research with a “dreaming” question: “What would it be like if we were able to freely give and receive unconditional love to each other?” Our next question was, “What prevents us from being able to do this?” We spent the early part of our relationship learning how to heal our own developmental shocks, traumas, and stresses and then we began to utilize what we had learned in our

Barry and Janae Weinhold are former university professors, licensed mental health professionals, specialists in developmental psychology, trauma, conflict resolution, systemic change and violence prevention. They co-direct the Carolina Institute for Conflict Resolution and Creative Leadership (CICRCL) in Asheville, North Carolina and can be reached through their flagship website, www.weinholds.org.

professional work with clients and students. This line of questioning led us eventually to identify two tracks of human evolution: the “LOVEvolution Track,” involving the reciprocal exchange of unconditional love and the “developmental trauma track,” that blocks this exchange.

We began our research by mapping the essential developmental processes in four successive stages of individual evolution on the LOVEvolution Track, beginning with pre-conception. Once we understood how our individual development could evolve, we identified the short- and long-term impact of unrecognized symptoms of unhealed developmental shock, trauma, and stress on our individual evolution and how they were blocking our individuation process.

Drawing from Bruce Lipton’s work (2005) in fractal evolution we saw that we could apply this same fractal pattern to six different levels of human systems. We used the information from this part of our research to create our developmental meta-theory.

Theoretically and clinically, our work stands on the shoulders of many pioneers in the field of pre- and perinatal psychology, including William Emerson (1996), Thomas Verny (1988), David Chamberlain (1988), Marshall and Phyllis Klaus (2000), Stephanie Mines (2003), and many others. We acknowledge the great base of scientific work that they have created over the last 30 years.

Healing Developmental Trauma

Our theory maps the essential developmental processes in four stages of development: co-dependent (bonding), counterdependent (separation), independent (mastery), and interdependent (cooperation) stages. The theory describes these essential developmental processes for microsystems: individuals, couples, families, and for macrosystems: organizations, nation-states, and the human race.

This theory presents an expanded paradigm for understanding the pervasive long-term influence of psycho-biologically dysregulating relational experiences during the conception, prenatal, perinatal, bonding, and separation stages of development. This paradigm focuses specifically on the impact of subtle parent-child relational interactions as both causative and curative factors in identifying and treating the long-term effects of early shock, trauma, and stress. We use the term “developmental trauma” to identify subtle types of early childhood dysregulating relational experiences that are frequently overlooked by both practitioners and researchers. Others have included acute dysregulating events such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, severe

neglect, and physical abandonment in their definition of developmental trauma.

We also found that many therapists misdiagnose and fail to differentiate among symptoms of shock, trauma, and stress. We have placed them on a continuum that 1) describes the discrete behavioral symptoms of each, 2) identifies the different parts of the brain and the autonomic nervous system that are active in each, 3) specifies different orientations to time, and 4) shows the appropriate clinical interventions for each (Weinhold, 2011).

Developmental Systems Theory

When we created our unified meta-theory, we strived to meet John Bowlby's criteria for a good theory: "The merits of a scientific theory are to be judged in terms of the range of phenomena it embraces, the internal consistency of its structure, the precision of the predictions it can make, and the practicality of testing them." (Bowlby, 1969, p. 173)

By definition, developmental systems theory is a binary meta-theory for understanding, mapping, and advancing human evolution. Theoretically, in addition to drawing from the work of pre- and perinatal researchers and psychologists mentioned earlier, it also includes critical theoretical elements from the work of Allen Schore, Stephen Porges, and Sue Carter, traumatologists such as Bessel van der Kolk, James Prescott's work on maternal deprivation, Arny & Amy Mindell's Global Process Work, and Robert Kegan's stages of consciousness.

The theory describes two tracks of human development, the LOVEvolution track and the trauma track and shows how all human systems move through four successive stages of optimal development. It also identifies the essential developmental processes that must be completed in each stage for a system to evolve. Developmental systems theory also differentiates among the subtle states of developmental shock, trauma, and stress that block human evolution and are often missed by practitioners. It describes how these often overlooked and unhealed relational shocks, traumas, and stresses prevent the completion of essential developmental processes & stages. Finally, using the theory as a base, we have created interventions that are designed to help shift each human system from the trauma track to the LOVEvolution track.

The trauma track maps how and where essential developmental processes are left incomplete or distorted because of less than optimal early mother-child interactions that causes developmental shock,

trauma, and stress. The LOVEvolution track maps the optimal development that occurs when the essential developmental processes are completed. This allows the evolution of six levels of human systems to advance: individuals, couples, families, organizations/communities, cultures/nation-states and, ultimately, the human race.

Our Research Laboratory

Part of the motivation for our research grew out of a mutual desire to create an intimate, committed, long-term, individuated relationship. Early in our marriage, we recognized how our conflicts were rooted in our early developmental histories, and how they had interfered with intimacy in our previous marriages. So we committed to clearing ourselves and our relationship of developmental shocks, traumas, and stresses that blocked the kind of relationship that we wanted. Examples of these interventions are described below.

Being systemic thinkers, we decided to use our individual issues and our couple relationship as laboratories for our research. Over time our laboratory expanded to include our clinical work as therapists with individuals, couples, and families; our professional work as counselor educators in the MA level graduate training program at the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs; our experiences of living/working internationally; and our experiences in working with “notable” therapists and trainers. We eventually recognized many interlocking theoretical and practical pieces that we began to assimilate, integrate, and synthesize into a unified theory of human development that also supported our vision of personal and couple individuation.

We used mostly clinical and heuristic research methods, plus some quasi-experimental methods. Our pre- and perinatal research did have some experimental limitations because, as Jung supposedly said, “When studying birth trauma it is very difficult to find a control group of subjects who were not born.”

The first focus of our research was identifying the critical elements necessary for a healthy relationship with ourselves and then with each other. We identified four stages of optimal individual, couple, and family development: codependent, counterdependent, independent, and interdependent stages, and the essential developmental processes that ideally must be completed in each stage.

Through our personal work, therapy, and training, we discovered the nuances of how subtle developmental shocks, traumas, and stresses can have long-term effects on healthy relationships. We created unique intervention tools for helping individuals, couples, and

families identify and heal the effects of these shocks, traumas and stresses, and summarized our research findings (Weinhold & Weinhold, 1992, 1993, 2003, 2004, 2006a, b, c, 2008a, b, 2009).

The second focus of our research examined the relationship between trauma and conflict. During our clinical work and teaching, we discovered that interpersonal conflict is where developmental shock, trauma, and stress likely will show up in relationships. We were able to identify three types of relational conflict: conflicts of wants and needs, conflicts of values and beliefs, and intractable conflicts. We created specific intervention tools for resolving each type of conflict, modified them for use in all six levels of human systems and summarized these in previous writing (2000, 2009).

The third focus of our research involved creating interventions in larger systems, such as schools, organizations, and communities. Barry created The Kindness Campaign as an intervention tool for changing the social and emotional climate in childcare, preschool settings, in K-12 schools, organizations, and entire communities. He wrote six manuals each containing proven activities and intervention strategies for working with these various systems (Weinhold, 1999, 2000, 2006a, 2006b).

The fourth focus of our research was on cultural and nation-state development. Most of this research was carried out during our consulting contracts with the United Nations during the 1994 International Year of the Family, when we founded the Bratislava International Centre for Family Studies and Janae's ongoing training and consultation with ROZRADA, with our sister NGO in Kiev, Ukraine since 1994.

The third and fourth research foci were summarized in our most recent publications (Weinhold & Weinhold, 2009, 2011)

Developmental Process Work: Intervention Tools for Microsystems

We also created developmental process work as a clinical modality for working with individuals, couples, and families during our many years of working with clients, teaching graduate level counseling students, and in our training workshops. We also utilize developmental process tools to work with macro systems. The goal of both intervention modalities is to create relational experiences that reconstellate the critical psychobiological attunement between mother and child to help foster relational reciprocity and emotional self-regulation. These modalities also teach essential skills that are

necessary for individuals to complete the “psychological birth” and their individuation process.

Developmental process work is a short-term, relationship-oriented therapy approach for treating individuals, couples, and families with symptoms of unhealed developmental shock, trauma and stress. This work describes the differences among shock, trauma, and stress related symptoms and identifies state-appropriate treatment interventions. Clinically, it emphasizes the therapeutic relationship between clinician and client as the primary healing crucible for identifying and healing the long-term effects of developmental shock, trauma or stress. Experientially, it provides clients with resources to help them increase their capacity for individuation and for giving and receiving unconditional love.

Developmental process therapy focuses on the “rightness” of what the client presents and honors the client’s process. It acknowledges that clients have innate templates that guide them towards individuation, and emphasizes that the therapist’s task is to help them find ways to restore this template by using specific tools to help them re-pattern their nervous system and, ultimately, activate their innate individuation process.

Our model recognizes that all relational conflicts and health issues involve the reenactment of unhealed developmental shocks, traumas or stresses that have distorted this innate template. In our model, conflicts and health issues also contain the path and process for healing them. Contextually, the more a therapist is able to re-constellate the elements of an optimal “mother-child” relationship, the more likely that the healing process will unfold.

Developmental process therapy involves six specific types of interventions:

1. The Trauma Elimination Technique or other trauma clearing tools to clear sensory system distortions and mindbody memories.
2. Cognitive therapy tools to modify distorted cognition and beliefs.
3. The client-therapist relationship to teach clients how to re-regulate emotions.
4. Gestalt and psychodramatic tools to heal splits within the Self.
5. A variety of experiential therapy tools to help clients reclaim dissociated parts.
6. Psychodynamic and attachment therapy tools to help the client re-pattern self-other relational dynamics learned in his/her family-of-origin.

Consciousness, Healing, and the Brain

We found a lot of scientific support for our clinical model from new research on the function of the brain's prefrontal cortex. When reenacting unhealed experiences of developmental shock, trauma, and stress states people become emotionally dysregulated and their responses come from the limbic brain's hard-wired memories. This causes people to disconnect from their prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex contains relational information about love and nurturing. In order to reconnect with the pre-frontal cortex, it is necessary to consciously interrupt the signal to the hard-wired limbic memory.

Once people become aware that they have triggered a limbic memory of an unhealed developmental shock, trauma, or stress, they are then able to use this consciousness to re-regulate themselves emotionally. The more they are able to do this the more they can reconnect to the pre-frontal cortex that supports the following important psychobiological functions: (Thompson 2010, p. 162-163)

1. *Body regulation.* Helps you regulate your body reactions to unhealed developmental shock, trauma, and stress.
2. *Attuned communication.* When connected to the prefrontal cortex you can connect with another person's mind as well as your own mind. You can attune to another person without words only by looking into their eyes.
3. *Emotional balance.* Helps us re-regulate our emotions when they are triggered by the memory of an unhealed shock, trauma, or stress.
4. *Response flexibility.* Allows us to reflect before we act and then respond after we have more completely assessed the situation.
5. *Empathy.* Enables us to know what someone else is feeling.
6. *Insight.* The prefrontal cortex helps us begin to make sense out of our thoughts and feelings by connecting past and present to predict the potential future at any given moment in our life.
7. *Fear modulation.* It has the capacity to help us calm down when the "fear factory" in our limbic brain goes into over-production.
8. *Intuition.* It is where we process signals from various parts of our brain and enables us to intuitively decide the best course of action.
9. *Morality.* It is where we construct our sense of morality and can apply that to our beliefs about ourselves, other people and the world around us.

Access to an integrated pre-frontal cortex enables people to live a flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable life. If the pre-frontal cortex is dis-integrated or disconnected, it cannot transmit information to help override the more primitive impulses from the lower brain containing memories of unhealed developmental shocks, traumas and stresses.

Intervention Tools for Shifting from the Trauma Track to the LoveEvolution Track: Research Results

Below are the most successful interventions we used with each level of human systems and a summary of the research results we achieved.

Individual Interventions

We used therapy, coaching and psycho-education with over 2000 individuals. Code: (S=Shock, T=Trauma & St=Stress)

Goal: To help individuals individuate.

- Using of self-inventories to help students & clients uncover hidden & unhealed developmental shock/trauma/stress from early childhood. (S, T & St)
- Attuning with the client & following his/her process. (S, T & St)
- Creating an attuned relationship with the client. (S, T & St)
- Doing appropriate personal sharing and modeling. (S, T & St)
- Teaching students & clients to use the Trauma Elimination Technique when they are triggered. (T)
- Teaching students & clients about drama triangle dynamics and ways to get off the triangle. (T & St)
- Facilitating the Parental Completion Process: A gestalt therapy process. (T & St)
- Teaching students & clients emotional regulation skills (breathwork, centering, holding work). S & T)
- Reframing the client's presenting problems to facilitate the healing-in-process. (S, T & St)

Results. When the therapist was able to follow the client's process and utilize effective developmental process intervention tools, clients made significant healing progress in 3-6 sessions, while some chose to do more extensive therapy.

Couple Interventions

We used co-therapy, coaching and psycho-education with over 200 couples. Code: (S=Shock, T=Trauma & St=Stress)

Goal. To shift couple dynamics from a competitive struggle to one based on building cooperative support.

- Utilizing the Couple Sculpting Diagnostic Tool. (S, T & St)
- Teaching couple conflict resolution skills using worksheets for each type of conflict. (T & St)
- Reframing the presenting issues into a healing paradigm. ((S, T & St)
- Teaching couples about drama triangle dynamics and ways to get off the triangle. (T & St)
- Helping couples learn how to shift from a competitive to a cooperative approach in resolving conflicts. (T & St)
- Teaching couples to use structured role-playing sessions to help heal early incidents of shock, trauma or stress & to help complete the developmental processes from that time. (S, T & St)
- Having couples complete the Betrayal Clearing Exercise. (S, T, & St)
- Teaching couples how to recognize and reclaim projections. (T & St)

Results. The therapists were able teach the couple skills to help them to work on the effects of unhealed developmental shock, traumas or stress that appear in their relationship in 3-6 sessions. Couples also reported success in helping each other heal their developmental shocks, traumas or stresses following therapy.

Family Interventions

We used co-therapy, process consultation and coaching with over 30 families. Code: (S=Shock, T=Trauma & St=Stress)

Goal. To shift family dynamics from competitive to one based on cooperative support.

- Doing home visits – Conducting co-therapy in clients' home. (S, T & St)
- Providing process consultation at family meetings. (St)
- Teaching couple new parenting skills especially limit-setting and discipline skills. (St)
- Providing family members with experiences of a supportive family climate. (St)

- Coaching members on how to restore emotional balance during family interactions. (S, T, & St)
- Teaching family members how to recognize and reclaim projections. (T & St)

Results. The therapists were able to help the family create a more positive and supportive climate, with more direct expression of positive feelings, with evidence of more effective limit setting by parents. Therapists showed families how to create effective family meetings to provide more family structure.

Community Interventions

We used “The Kindness Campaign,” a community-based violence prevention programs initiated in 13 different U. S. communities. Code: (S=Shock, T=Trauma & St=Stress)

Goal. To shift the community climate from fear-based to one based on love and kindness by increasing the collective awareness of kind behaviors in the community.

- Distributing over 80,000 kindness buttons in Colorado Springs, CO (Spread Kindness...its Contagious). Buttons were worn and passed on when witnessing an act of kindness. (T & St)
- Soliciting media sponsors (TV, radio, print, electronic) who reported on acts of kindness. (T & St)
- Producing Radio & TV PSA's by community leaders on the importance of kindness. (T & St)
- Establishing a kindness line to report acts of kindness in the community through the CBS Affiliate TV station in Colorado Springs (over 22,000 calls received). They ended their evening TV news program by playing one of the calls. (T & St)
- Creating TV and newspaper news feature stories about acts of kindness of residents. (T & St)
- Establishing neighborhood and community-wide awards ceremonies honoring the kindest citizens. (T & St)
- Organizing interfaith celebrations of kindness showing kindness as a common theme in all religions. (T & St)
- Holding dialogue dinners with people of diverse religious beliefs. (T & St)

Results. Television viewers survey after 6 months showed that 75%

of those polled believed the Kindness Campaign had significantly reduced violence in the community. Dialogue dinners created meaningful dialogue on social and religious topics, further uniting the community.

School Interventions

We used “The Kind & Safe Schools Initiative,” a bullying and put-down prevention and character education program initiated in over 600 schools in the U. S. and Canada. Code: (S=Shock, T=Trauma & St=Stress)

Goal. To change the school climate from negative to positive by emphasizing recognition of kind acts.

- Conducting staff in-service training. (S, T & St)
- Training teachers to distribute kindness buttons to students displaying kind acts. (T & St)
- Holding school-wide recognition assemblies to honor the kindest kids. (T & St)
- Creating a character education curriculum embedded in all subject matter classes. (T & St)
- Teaching conflict resolution to all students. (T & St)
- Establishing a peer mediation program. (S, T & St)
- Developing a bullying & put-down prevention program. (S, T & St)
- Initiating a restorative justice approach to the school discipline program. (S, T, & St)
- Educating with parents on kind discipline methods through the PTO organizations. (S, T & St)

Results. Reports of bullying and put-down behavior were reduced by over 90%, and discipline referrals dropped by 35%.

Business and Non-Profit Interventions

We used a Developmental Process Consultation provided to 25 churches, non-profits and small businesses. Code: (S=Shock, T=Trauma & St=Stress)

Goal. To shift the organizational climate from competitive to supportive & cooperative.

- Doing collaborative data-collection with key managers and

employees to determine where incomplete developmental processes were interfering with the evolution of the organization. (S, T, & St)

- Providing process consultation at key organizational meetings. (S, T, & St)
- Conducting coaching sessions with key executives. (S, T & St)
- Training employees & managers in systemic ways to recognize kind acts. (T & St)
- Training seminars for employees to teach them skills to address the effects of their unhealed developmental shock, trauma and stress on their job performance including conflict resolution skills. (S, T & St)

Results. Employees empowered to change the work place climate from being highly competitive and negative to positive, supportive & cooperative, with higher employee morale and fewer turnovers. Aspects of this program were implemented in a number of churches, non-profits, and small businesses.

International Interventions

We used a variety of techniques for a Ukraine Development Project known as ROZRADA. Code: (S=Shock, T=Trauma & St=Stress)

Goal. To implement the systemic principles of DST in a country (Ukraine) recovering from collective traumatic experiences (the Chernobyl disaster, post-Soviet Syndrome) through onsite (Kiev) training, supervision, consultation and professional and personal support of an NGO (ROZRADA) staff since 1994.

- Providing foundational therapy skills in “practical psychology” for ROZRADA’s staff. (S, T & St)
- Providing consultation and clinical supervision to ROZRADA’s staff. (S, T & St)
- Working systemically to help Ukraine citizens and families shift towards more democratic social and political structures. (S, T & St)
- Providing legal and educational stability for a newly formed NGO. (St)
- Bringing the ROZRADA’s Director to the U. S. several times for advanced training. (St)
- Observing and monitoring the implementation of our

developmental systems theory principles to help Ukrainian citizens cope with rapid social, economic, political, and personal change. (S, T & St)

- Conducting training in developmental process work for Ukrainian therapists and giving lectures to Ukrainian organizations. (S, T & St)
- ROZRADA translating and publishing our books on co-dependency and counterdependency books for distribution in Russian speaking countries. (S, T & St)

Results. Director, staff, trainees, and ROZRADA clients were able to culturally modify our model to fit their social and political environment in ways that empowered them to personally and collectively become more self-directed, self-reliant, and individuated in the following ways: 1) they developed many consulting and training programs for all of Ukraine's states, 2) they were awarded multi-year funding contracts for several projects related to family issues, women's issues and children's issues, 3) the staff sought out complementary trainings in psychotherapy approaches and synthesized it's culturally appropriate model for working with Chernobyl families, Post-Soviet Syndrome, the transition to a market economy, and the influx of Western pathologies such as prostitution, human trafficking, pornography, and sexually transmitted diseases, and 4) now ROZRADA is recognized as a national center for psychological support and training in Ukraine.

The Personal Impact of Healing our Developmental Trauma

When we met during Jean Houston's yearlong Mystery School training some 26 years ago and were married by Jean in Egypt at Abydos, we could not imagine where our journey would lead us. We were almost immediately faced with finding ways to heal the effects of our early childhood shocks, traumas, and stresses on our relationship. Our commitment to do this has opened doors that we never anticipated. While much of our early focus was about recognizing the powerful imprint of the mother-child relationship and how it shaped our personal relationship, it slowly grew into a larger understanding of how this early imprint ultimately shapes the evolution of all of humanity. We shared a lot about this part of our expansive journey in our books on conflict resolution and healing developmental trauma.

One of our deepest commitments is to doing our own work and "living our model." With each psychological and emotional deepening,

we became more individuated, not only from each other and our family-of-origin beliefs and behaviors, but also from the collective religious and historical beliefs and practices. Through our transpersonal grounding, we gradually we found ourselves immersed in a more mythical, mystical, and esoteric search to understand the forces that have distorted humans' instinctive life-giving nature.

It was our mutual attraction to esoteric Mystery School teachings that drew us into deeper forms of seeking and fueled a struggle to reconcile our cognitive dissonance between the "what is" and the "what could be" of the human experience. The Avatar movie's archetypal battle between a life-giving indigenous people trying to protect their planet against life-taking off-planet forces provided us with a brilliant 3-D screen for coalescing many of the threads of reality that we've been studying: Gnosticism (particularly it's description of the archons, an invading off-planet force), Egyptian mysteries, Sacred Marriage rites, meta-history, Mayan cosmologies and the prophesies of 2012.

Currently, we are immersed in the first year of a three-year contract through our Institute to apply developmental systems theory to the social development of The Villages at Crest Mountain, a new intentional community near Asheville, NC. We are using some developmental process consultation intervention strategies to help residents heal any developmental shocks, traumas, and stresses they might have and help the community experience life on the LOVEvolution track. This project supports our own vision of "birthing the future" similar to that of Suzanne Arms: "Our vision is a world in which every person is able to start life and develop from a deep sense of trust, able to express his or her soul's full purpose for this lifetime, and able to live in harmonious relationship with themselves—and all life—on this earth." (Arms, 2011).

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