Understanding Shame: The Clinical Implications of Trauma Work with Female Adolescents
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Introduction
Childhood Trauma & Adult Psychopathology
Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been shown to have a strong correlation with the development of anxiety, depression, sexual risk-taking, anger problems, intimate partner violence, suicide, addiction, and even early death (Anda et al., 2006; Felitti, 2002; Feitlli, 2011; Teicher et al. 2006; Kerr-Morse & Wiley, 2012; Kanamuller et al., 2014; Nilsson et al., 2012; ACE Study 2005; Lijffijt, Hu, & Swan, 2014). As young girls with trauma backgrounds grow into adulthood they are uniquely vulnerable to these future mental health concerns and wellness obstacles, especially as growing women without sufficient support and intervention (Badone et al., 1996; Herbert & Lavoie, 2008; Lawrence et al., 2006; Longson, 2004; Ruffolo et al., 2004; Schleider & Weisz, 2016). By exploring the complicated and delicate transition of adolescence – a time when the brain plasticity and evolving personality allow for shame exploration and resilience development – therapists can find a window of opportunity for intervention.

What are ACEs & Why Do They Matter?
This presentation is based on current data from the ongoing Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE) (CDC, 2016), which determined in the general population the prevalence and long-term significance of ACEs. The ACE score is based on the occurrence of the following: (1) abuse, (2) neglect, (3) addiction in the home, (4) MI in the home, (5) loss of parent, (6) domestic violence, (7) parent incarceration. Current results of this longitudinal study show that 64% of participants had experience with at least 1 ACE, and 12.5% had experience with 4 or more. They have also found that women are 50% more likely to have a score of 5 or more.

For those with an ACE score of 4 or more:
- 7x more likely to be an alcoholic
- 6x more likely to have sex before age 15
- 2x as likely to have heart disease and cancer
- 46x more likely to be depressed
- 12x to commit suicide

Depression, a largely female issue, occurs less often in prepubescent children than in adults, but rises dramatically in adolescence along with low self-esteem. And with MDD often comes suicide risk – for teens, suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death (Rohde et al., 2013; Barlow & Durand, 2015). Furthermore, adolescent girls are particularly prone to psychopathology because of their:
- delinquency and conduct disorders
- antisocial behavior or callousness
- more sexual partners
- hostility and anger
- depression and anxiety
- eating disorders
- dissociation
- IPV & victimization

The Adolescent Stage of Development
Adolescence is a critical transition period when individuals face major developmental changes and issues related to identity, independence, intimacy, and sexuality (Hebert, 2008; Rice et al., 1993; Zona, 2011; Wilson, 2015).
- The brain is only 80% developed in adolescence, and this time of growth allows for learning and skill acquisition.
- This plasticity also makes adolescent brains more vulnerable to external stressors.
- The prefrontal cortex is still growing and changing. It is the part of the brain that modulates behavior, self-control, evaluates consequences, and helps with problem-solving. It is especially at risk for the effects of early stress.
- Exposure to ACEs has the potential to disrupt the successful completion of developmental tasks and healthy brain functioning.
- Despite this vulnerability, teens remain an underserved population in mental health (Lawrence, 2008).

Female Adolescents
When mental disorders are not treated in adolescence, they tend to become chronic and a harbinger of a long trajectory of decreased quality of life and diminished productivity, especially for women (Lawrence, 2008; Logsdon, 2013; Pine et al., 2012). There are a number of internalizing and externalizing symptoms that can manifest with ACE youth:
- Maladaptive coping behaviors (Malcolm et al., 2004)
- self-image disturbances (Mostofsky et al., 2005; Klee et al., 2015)
- phenomenological disturbances (Linn, 2008; Miller & Rice, 2010)
- psychopathological disturbances (Breslau & Miller, 2005)

For shame to grow, you need secrecy + silence + judgment. Shame is linked to feelings of isolation, powerlessness, disconnection, depression, and suicide, and individuals with ACEs are at a greater risk of becoming shame-based individuals (Tagney & Dearing, 2000; Herman, 1992; Bryant-Davis, 2005; Potter-Efron, 1989; van Dalen, 2001).

Trauma Literature on Shame & Resilience

Shame:
- The painful belief in one’s basic defectiveness as a human being, and therefore unworthiness of love and connection.

Feelings  Thoughts  Behaviors
of shame of shame of shame

Female Adolescents
- Female gender was the strongest demographic predictor of total trauma symptoms.” – Singer et al., 1995
- Female gender was the strongest demographic predictor of specific trauma symptoms: Physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and emotional abuse.

Conceptualization of Shame & Resilience

Trauma and Shame:
- For shame to grow, you need secrecy + silence + judgment. A family rule of silence may teach a child that secret-keeping is necessary for survival.
- A neglected child will often believe there is something wrong with him/her that triggered the rejection.
- Failure to stop the violence, chaos, or abuse generates feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and guilt, which can then lead to internalization and self-blame.
- Messages from society often make people feel shame, as if they are to blame for the violation.

Applied to Teen Girls: Clinical Implications
Trauma-informed strategies are designed to be:
- Reparative
- Restorative
- Resilience enhancing

Areas for Further Research
Adolescence offers a unique window in time when self-relevant beliefs are molded and solidified. These critical years may be ideal for challenging shame and building resilience in the wake of trauma, and help teens to live in a way that allows for worthiness & connection. We need trauma intervention to be:
- Gender-sensitive
- Developmentally appropriate
- Shame-based