

Trauma and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy

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Trauma is a significant topic in therapy affecting many of the clients that are looking for help. Along with an increase in the number of people desiring help to overcome trauma, a new understanding of trauma has recently unfolded in psychology. By its very nature, trauma is the negative outcome of something specific and preventative measures will help mitigate trauma and increase wellness. Wellness is also possible for those who have already experienced trauma. Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) is one avenue for clients seeking wellness after experiencing trauma. While DBT is not an integrated form of therapy, it can be used alongside the transformational counselling model (TCM) for clients who desire faith integration in their therapy sessions. Understanding trauma is essential for therapists; part of this understanding includes seeking wellness throughout difficult life circumstances and what therapy modalities to use for helping clients who struggle with trauma. This paper will use the case study of Bart Millard to help illustrate trauma, wellness, and DBT. The paper will end with a personal discussion of the TCM, explaining its effectiveness in therapy.

Case Study

To help illustrate the research in this paper, reflections on the life journey of the character Bart Millard from the movie *I Can Only Imagine* are used. For this paper, I will only reflect on the trauma Bart experienced and relate his traumatic experiences to current research findings. Therefore, I will not reflect on the last portion of the movie, where he makes amends with his father.

Bart Millard grows up with a physically and mentally abusive father, and his mother abandons him and his dad when he is ten years old. After years of rejection and abuse, Bart

leaves his father to pursue music and ends up in a band performing regularly. An elite music scout rejects Bart's band, and Bart loses control of his emotions and takes a break from his band to seek healing. Bart struggles with emotional regulation, feelings of worth, acceptance, and loneliness, and he seeks to bury these struggles in his devotion to music. Bart protects himself by being distant from others and letting music consume his life. Some of Bart's triggers and signs of trauma are a fear of rejection, flashbacks to his childhood, being easily scared by others, and nervous and jumpy tendencies. Bart also struggles to forgive his dad, is never able to tell his girlfriend that he loves her, and strives to get the approval of others so that he can feel better about himself. Bart Millard has experienced trauma with rejection, abandonment, parental separation, and physical and mental abuse.

Explaining Trauma

The idea of trauma has been skewed over the years. According to Bessel van der Kolk (2021), trauma does not result from a specific event because everyone is different and processes events differently. Instead of trauma being the result of a specific event, trauma is the result of how an individual responds to and processes a problematic situation. Trauma results from emotions that have not been processed with supportive people. When individuals can process a problematic event with trustworthy and supportive people, they are much less likely to experience trauma. Trauma sets in when emotions are not processed, and our bodies continue to relive a difficult event even after the event is over (Big Think, 2021). The physical responses a body went through during the traumatic event will repeat themselves when triggered, even when no danger is present.

Many scholars look at trauma through the lens of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). The general idea behind ACEs is that with each ACE an individual has experienced, their

chances of physical and mental health issues increase. According to Allan and Donkin (2015), the presence of “ACEs can increase the chances of children and young people experiencing mental illness or a low level of mental wellbeing, including low self-esteem, depression and relationship difficulties...but also there can be a lasting impact on adult mental health” (p. 14). Aside from the presence of psychological issues, ACEs can also affect the physical health of individuals. Allan and Donkin (2015) share that through epigenetics, ACEs can trigger the onset of many health-related issues later in life ranging from heart, lung and liver issues to cancer, inflammatory, and immune system struggles (pp. 13-18).

Childhood trauma is critical to note in a therapy setting because of its significant impact on the lives of adults. Cook et al. (2005) note that “adult survivors of complex trauma have been found to continue to exhibit significant deficits in many domains of functioning and meet criteria for a wide range of psychiatric disorders beyond PTSD” (pp. 2-3). These findings help explain why many adults who come into therapy have struggles rooted in childhood experiences.

Finally, and as was mentioned before, when considering what trauma is and how it affects individuals, it is vital to look at how trauma is relived in the body. After experiencing a traumatic event, individuals can relive the event many times through body memory. When their body is triggered by a memory of the trauma they lived through, it continues “to react as if they were back at the moment of trauma and took the same physical actions that they made at the time of trauma, like blowing up, fighting back, ducking, or becoming frozen” (van der Kolk & Najavits, 2013, p. 517). Considering ACEs, complex childhood trauma and body memory, let us reflect on our case study of Bart Miller.

Bart's history of physical and mental abuse, maternal abandonment, parental separation, and rejection are all traumatic life events. Bart has endured many ACEs and is a survivor of

complex childhood trauma. We see evidence of this in Bart's life because he struggles with emotional regulation, feelings of inferiority, emotional outbursts, intimate connection with others and avoidance in his relationship with his father. Bart also exhibits body memories of his childhood trauma during flashbacks, angry outbursts, and struggles to write his music. Before we consider how to help Bart recover from his traumatic life experiences, let us work through what wellness could look like for Bart.

Wellness

Wellness is the state of working towards health and stability in life. Within Bart's life, we will analyze two aspects that, if changed, could have helped Bart achieve a higher degree of wellness by having protective factors in place. Then we will look at some ideas of how he can achieve wellness as an adult without the suggested protective factors in childhood.

One of the most significant protective factors Bart could have benefited from growing up was having a supportive adult investing in his life. Bessel van der Kolk (2015) shares how having a safe place to come and unpack traumatic events with a caring individual helps our bodies calm down and complete the stress response cycle, lessening the impact of trauma (pp. 52-53). Children need to have an adult in their lives that can help them manage emotions and life events. This positive adult influence results in "an internalized ability to experience one's feelings, both positive and negative, and to deal with them. There is also confidence that others can be relied on to relieve discomfort or fear and that oneself is worthy of their care" (Sable, 2007, p. 4). Therefore, even with an unstable home life, Bart could have experienced a greater sense of wellness as a child with the influence of a healthy, supportive adult.

Another factor that could have helped Bart with wellness as a child is a therapist who could work through an ACEs questionnaire with him and help him work through his trauma. Understanding what ACEs Bart had to endure would give a childhood therapist a good starting place in working with Bart. The answers to this questionnaire would have helped the therapist plan where to focus their time with Bart and create a foundation for many conversations about his experiences and how they impact his everyday functioning. This information collection would also have helped the therapist create a treatment plan with Bart that focused on his struggles and ultimately brought about the greatest opportunity for healing.

Looking at Bart's story from a different perspective, let us consider how Bart could seek wellness as an adult who did not have the previously mentioned supports. Years after the trauma experienced in his childhood, Bart's body continues to live as if his traumatic events are still happening. To seek out wellness after trauma, one thing Bart can do is learn how to lessen his fight responses. Currently, when Bart's traumatic memories surface, he experiences a fight response in his body where his cortisol and adrenalin levels increase. As a result of these hormonal increases, Bart has difficulties managing his emotions, he has flashbacks, and he pulls away from people he is in relationships with. Through therapy (as we will talk about later), Bart can create new pathways in his brain that will help him lessen this fight response and take control of what is happening in his body.

Another method that could help Bart find wellness comes from Bessel van der Kolk (2015), who teaches about the brain's mirror neurons, stating that most people will innately mirror the people around them. However, individuals who have experienced trauma have lost the ability to mirror others safely and have developed alternative ways of expression as a safety mechanism. According to van der Kolk, individuals who have experienced trauma can seek out

wellness through treatment that “reactivate[s] the capacity to safely mirror, and be mirrored, by others, but also to resist being hijacked by others’ negative emotions” (p. 59). Learning how to mirror and be mirrored by others will help Bart on his journey to wellness by retraining his brain to recognize that not all people are a threat and that mirroring can be healthy. Through therapy, Bart can seek wellness and healing, create new brain pathways, and learn mindfulness techniques, emotion regulation and coping skills. These new tools learned through therapy will help Bart’s wellness by equipping him to invest in positive relationships, control his emotional outbursts, and lessen his fight responses.

Evidence-Based Treatment: Dialectical Behaviour Therapy

Bearing in mind that therapy is an option for Bart in seeking wellness, we will look at how dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) could help Bart on his healing journey. DBT is an evidence-based therapy model that teaches acceptance and helps change emotions and behaviours. It uses the top-down approach of “(re-) connecting with others, and allowing ourselves to know and understand what is going on with us, while processing the memories of the trauma” (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 3). Through DBT, Bart can learn to accept his experiences as valid life events. He would be encouraged to make positive changes to help him manage his behaviours and emotions and improve his relationships with others. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (camh) (n.d.) website describes DBT as consisting of five components: a DBT skills training group, individual psychotherapy, in-the-moment coaching, case management strategies, and a DBT consultation team. The skills training group portion of DBT applies four main modules: mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, and emotion regulation.

According to the information on the camh (n.d.) website, we will analyze how DBT could help Bart. In the case study of Bart Millard, who has experienced trauma with rejection, abandonment, parental separation, and physical and mental abuse, seeking out DBT could help him find wellness and healing. Bart would learn mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, and emotion regulation in the skills training group. He would be equipped with mindfulness skills to help him navigate the intense feelings and emotions triggered when he feels rejected. These mindfulness skills would transfer into distress tolerance; using his mindfulness skills Bart will be capable of learning how to cope with stressful moments by being present in the moment. Bart would also learn interpersonal effectiveness and emotion regulation. These skills would help him when he struggles with outbursts of anger or the need to prove himself to others because of his struggles with rejection and abuse. Interpersonal effectiveness and emotion regulation skills would help Bart respond well to others while standing up for himself. Through DBT, Bart's communication style will be transformed to help protect him and help him foster good relationships. Being a part of a skills training group would also allow Bart to experience the acceptance and validation of others, helping him with his feelings of rejection. The foundation built through this skills group training would provide Bart with an excellent foundation for individual psychotherapy and case management. Individual psychotherapy and case management would encourage him to use his new skills, provide him with one-on-one support to make goals, and help him become more self-sufficient. Next, the in-the-moment coaching provided by DBT would help Bart recover because when he struggles with a specific situation or finds himself sliding into old behaviours, he can seek immediate support and encouragement to practice his new skills and continue his healing journey. Lastly, Bart can be encouraged knowing he is well looked after because the DBT consultation team component is a

group of professionals walking alongside Bart's DBT therapist and his case manager to motivate, help, support, and share knowledge with them.

Overall, DBT has excellent potential to help Bart work through his trauma, grow in resilience, obtain coping mechanisms and interpersonal skills, and increase positive relationships. DBT is an interactive and intentional approach to helping individuals heal from trauma. A local resource Bart could use to seek out DBT is the Psychology Today website (n.d.). On this website, Bart could search for therapists in his area and see their credentials and experience and which therapy modalities they offer before he contacts them. One local option on the website is K.R. Wellness in Georgetown, Ontario.

Therapy and Integration

Though there are many forms of integration therapy to consider, I am drawn to the transformational counselling model (TCM). The TCM is a type of integration counselling that balances psychology and theology. I would use the TCM within a Christian counselling organization where the main focus of counselling could be spiritual formation. According to Sears (2021), one of the primary goals of TCM is "spiritual formation into the image of Christ" (0:53). As a Christian, I see transformation in Christ as an integral part of believing in Jesus; having the freedom to assist clients with their psychological healing and spiritual journey is a more holistic approach to therapy. With the TCM's strong integration of experience, I could help clients with traditional modalities, spiritual discipline, spiritual direction, and spiritual formation (Sears, 2021). However, I recognize that not all of my clients will be Christians and that there will be times when I will have to alter my approach to meet the client's needs. I would still work with clients who are not Christians by using modalities such as DBT and continuing to model Christ through my love and commitment to these clients. While having the option of integrating

faith into counselling sessions feels like a more holistic approach, I recognize that it is not the only way for a client to heal. God has also given us the knowledge of psychology, which brings healing regardless of spiritual beliefs.

Using the TCM with Bart would be effective if he is a Christian. The TCM used alongside DBT would add to Bart's therapy experience and healing. Through the TCM, Bart would benefit from Christian resources, spiritual direction, and spiritual formation. As a relationship with Christ is a large part of who Christians are, incorporating faith into counselling will help clients make changes and experience healing in the deepest parts of their being.

Conclusion

With trauma affecting so many people, understanding how to help clients recover from trauma is essential. Trauma is the result of how a difficult event is processed and causes pain and struggles for many. In the case study of Bart Millard, we analyzed how his difficult life circumstances caused him to experience many signs and symptoms of trauma. While Bart faced much trauma, measures are available to help him achieve wellness. Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) is one modality that Bart could use to help him heal from his childhood trauma. If Bart were a client of mine and wished to integrate Christian faith into his therapy sessions, I would use TCM to help encourage him in this area. Trauma is complex, and it is essential for therapists to be well educated on both what trauma is and how to help clients struggling with trauma in their lives.

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