

D.D. Palmer's book 'The Chiropractor's Adjustor', written in 1910, lays out three causes of subluxation, known as 'The 3 T's': Traumas, Toxins, and Thoughts. (Seaman 2016) As chiropractors, we are mainly familiar with and work with the physical trauma model. We understand how physical trauma can cause subluxations in the spine, whether through injury or repetitive trauma such as poor posture. The idea that environmental toxins cause subluxations in the spine often gets relegated to the backburner. Likewise, The idea that thoughts can cause subluxations and poor health often doesn't even come into consideration when seeing patients. While we are well aware of the impact of physical trauma on health, emotional trauma often gets relegated to the domain of mental health professionals with little awareness as to how these emotional traumas affect our patient's physical health and how we can help as chiropractors. Long-term emotional or psychological trauma is often overlooked when a patient comes into our office with a physical health complaint. We are also not aware of how to look for the signs of current domestic abuse or previous domestic violence and how to address them.

In order to understand how domestic violence can affect our patients both physically and mentally and what the long-term health effects are, we must first clarify what domestic violence entails.

Domestic Violence and Health

What is Domestic Violence? Many of us associate domestic violence with physical violence. While it can be physical, it encompasses so much more and is often referred to as narcissistic abuse. It can be physical or sexual abuse but the abuse can also be psychological, emotional, financial, or spiritual. A common abuse tactic is the use of gaslighting where the abuser attempts to make the victim question their own reality by denying that they had abused the victim and attempting to paint the victim as unstable. This often leads to the victim living in confusion, unsure whether to trust their own intuition and memory of previous events. In addition, threats of violence or abandonment often leave the victim walking on eggshells, constantly trying to appease the abuser. It is no surprise that narcissistic abuse has been described as an attempted annihilation of the victim's true self-their self-esteem, personality, sense of self-worth, and even their personal autonomy. (Patra, et al. 2018)

This ongoing trauma has severe consequences on the victim's mental and physical health. From a nervous system perspective, victims often switch between a state of Sympathetic Overdrive (fight or flight state) and a state of Chronic Freeze (Overwhelm). In Fight or Flight, the survivor is experiencing high adrenaline, tied in with fear and extreme anxiety. Repeated episodes triggering the Fight or Flight state lead to a mental and physical crash known as Chronic Freeze. In Chronic Freeze, the victim is in a survival state akin to depression where they are just doing whatever they can to get through the day. However, further episodes of domestic violence or experiencing mental flashbacks after the abuse has

ended can retrigger the Fight or Flight state which then can lead to a state of overwhelm. This cycle of Sympathetic Overdrive (fight or flight) and Overwhelm (Chronic Freeze) can occur repeatedly until the victim crashes into a state of severe chronic illness. The victim has no energy to move back into the high anxiety state of Sympathetic Overdrive and will remain in a baseline survival mode until recovery is obtained. (Apigian 2021)

Domestic Violence Survivors are prone to experiencing autoimmune conditions. The continuing trauma of abuse leads to a breakdown of the body. In addition, there are three required factors needed for an autoimmune condition to develop. Intestinal permeability known commonly as leaky gut syndrome is a state where microscopic food particles exit the gut and enter the bloodstream, leading to chronic inflammation and causing the body to attack itself in an effort to destroy what it sees as foreign invaders. The two remaining factors are related to emotional states: shame and self-blame. Victims of domestic violence frequently blame themselves for the abuse. Because they blame themselves, this leads to a state of shame and a feeling of weakness. Many victims hide the abuse, defending their abuser and painting a picture of a happy relationship. Underneath the facade, victims often experience feelings of anger and guilt for failing to protect themselves and their children. Self-blame and shame offer repressed anger which then gets directed at oneself. This emotional state can lead the body to start attacking itself as a way to deal with that internal anger. In addition, survivors often experience fear of relationships and an inability to trust themselves. This can trigger more feelings of overwhelm which can heighten the autoimmune condition. It is important to note that these states can continue after the survivor is out of the abusive situation through flashbacks and generalized fear related to Complex-PTSD. (Van Der Kolk 2000) The victim can remain 'on edge' long after the abuse is over. Abuse can also continue after the separation or divorce through the use of threats against or control of the children, threats of harm against pets, or use of the Court system to financially abuse or control the survivor. Even though the survivor may appear to be 'safe' now that the relationship is over, they may still experience ongoing trauma through the use of post-separation abuse which can retrigger the Fight/Flight/Overwhelm cycle even if the survivor had been previously healing. (Apigian 2022)

Tools for Healing

Unlike the old saying, in the case of abuse, time does not heal all wounds. Without proper physical and mental health treatment, it can be very difficult for the survivor to heal from the effects of prolonged domestic violence and abuse. (Taket 2003) In this case, treatment requires a two-pronged approach to addressing both physical and mental health. As chiropractors, it may become necessary to step out of the musculoskeletal paradigm and go back to the holistic healthcare paradigm first espoused by D.D. Palmer, considered the effects of emotional and mental well-being as well as physical. While chiropractors are not

mental health providers, there is still a wide range of tools we can use that are within our scope.

Our first priority should be that we cultivate an atmosphere in our office where patients feel comfortable sharing past traumas and emotional issues as it relates to their health. We should also educate patients on how trauma and mental and emotional stresses affect their physical health. By cultivating an atmosphere of openness about physical and mental health and educating patients about the mind-body connection, we train them to look at their body and their physical wellness in a holistic manner. It is also important to be aware of the signs of ongoing abuse and trauma, including domestic violence, and understand how to address it. (Thompson, 2000)

There are several tools we can use that are in our scope of practice that incorporate mind-body techniques, Certainly, chiropractic techniques such as N.E.T., Applied Kinesiology, and a few others do incorporate emotional work in their treatment. Other techniques that are low force such as S.O.T., Logan Basic, and Craniosacral Therapy work to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, bringing the body into a relaxed state, where it is more able to process and release trauma. Other techniques include the use of Somatic exercises such as grounding, orienting, and containment, which provide a sense of safety to the nervous system. Breathing exercises can also help shift our body into a parasympathetic state by affecting our vagus nerve, which plays a key role in activating our parasympathetic nervous system. It is also important to understand the role of nutrition in supporting the body in releasing trauma and understanding how to move it out of an inflammatory state. Chronic inflammation and poor generalized health can exacerbate anxiety and depression, as well as any autoimmune conditions or chronic illnesses our patients may have. Assisting our patients in making healthy lifestyle choices and obtaining the nutrition to support their healing is essential.

Equally important is knowing when to refer our patients to mental health providers and having an adequate referral network. (Hameed, M. et al 2020) Cultivating relationships with mental health practitioners can help provide the support our patients need. As chiropractors, it is important to know our own individual strengths and limitations of the techniques we practice and our own individual knowledge and be able to refer out appropriately. That may include referrals not just to mental health providers but also to Functional Medicine Practitioners and other holistic health providers as well as more standard health providers. Having a wide network of trusted health providers that we can refer to can provide our patients with the care they truly need as well as open up more referral opportunities.

References

Apigian, A. Energy, Overwhelm and Freeze Module: Trauma as an Energy Problem. Trauma Healing Accelerated 2021 (5) 37-41

Apigian, A. Immune System: Autoimmunity, Trauma and Early Recognition. Trauma Healing Accelerated 2022 (3) 9-11

Hameed, M., O'Doherty, L. et al. Psychological Therapies for Women Who Experience Intimate Partner Violence. Cochrane Reviews 2020 Jul.

Patra, P, Prakash, B. et al. Intimate partner violence: Wounds are deeper. 2018 Oct-Dec 60 (4) 494-498

Seaman, D. Toxins, Toxicity and Endotoxemia: A Historical and Clinical Perspective for Chiropractors. J Chiropr Human 2016 Dec 23(1) 68-76

Taket, A., Nurse, J. et al. Routinely asking women about domestic violence in health settings. BMJ 2003,327

Thompson, R; Rivara F. et al. Identification and Management of Domestic Violence: A Randomized Trial. American Journal of Preventative Medicine. Vol.19 Iss 4 Nov 2000

Van Der Kolk, B. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and the Nature of Trauma. Dialogues Clin Neurosci 2000 Mar 2(1)::7-22