

Brain trauma induced by verbal abuse:
Implications for child and elder abuse intervention

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“Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never harm me.”

I like many of you was given this sage, but sad advice by well-meaning parents to help me navigate the slings and arrows of the school yard.

However, according to Kendal and Tuckett, the truth is, “Words can hit as hard as a fist”. For many people, verbal violence represents a devastating form of maltreatment. A parent’s verbal blows can cause significant brain trauma in children 18 and under, and Elderly women subjected to verbal violence have an increased mortality risk, and unlike younger abused women take more tranquilisers, sedatives and antidepressants.

Acts of parental verbal violence towards children can be associated, in early adulthood, with symptoms of depression, anxiety, anger-hostility, dissociation and ‘limbic irritability’. Limbic irritability sets the stage for problems later on in life, including mental health issues such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. The impact of verbal violence on the health of a child’s rapidly developing brain can be equivalent to non-familial sexual abuse.

Studies have found that the hippocampus (memory and other functions) shrank around 12% which functionally challenged the prefrontal cortex, interfered with speech and allowed ‘negative emotional responses’, managed by the amygdala (alarm system), to go unregulated.

Consequently, many enter adulthood with a biological basis for fear, and despite pretense to the contrary, can be swamped by unmanageable ‘fight or flight’ reactions. To cope, these victims try to avoid situations that can trigger such responses, which often includes family, thereby compounding social isolation.

Furthermore, Dr. Tomada and his team found that verbal abuse can reduce capacity in the region of the brain critical for language. The left temporal lobe structures appear to be particularly susceptible to parental verbal violence. Stunted development of the left hemisphere results in loss of capacity to learn, comprehend and verbally express, which has implications for study and job prospects.

So what constitutes verbal abuse? According to O’Leary, Maiuro, Teicher and Baker; yelling, lying, name-calling, insulting, swearing, withholding important information, unreasonably ordering around and telling a person she or he is worthless or nothing but trouble

Any family member can be verbally abusive, not just parents. Sibling abuse can be both severe and inflict injuries similar to parental abuse. Kendall observed that abuse by a brother or sister was often brutal and sadistic.

I quote from an email written by a survivor to his father recounting a nightmare:

“What was so difficult was the overwhelming, mind numbing and soul wrenching sense of humiliation that came so alive with every word he spoke and every look he gave.”

What deeply troubles me, is that these behaviours are not only tolerated, but the norm in numerous families today.

What could motivate the weaponisation of words within families? Emotional dysfunction can play a key role. Whereas some sufferers internalise pain others externalise it in the form of rage. ADHD for example is characterised by emotional dysfunction. ADHD is a severe and heritable illness impacting up to 5% of the population, and up to 80% who have it, also suffer a comorbidity. Of those, 40% will enter adulthood with the more serious, Conflict Disorder. A mental condition characterised by lying, verbal abuse and physical violence.

In a 2007 interview published by Harvard University, Dr Teicher asserted that Verbal beatings hurt as much as sexual abuse.

Is there recovery? Yes, however, Dr Tomada points out that psychotherapy most often requires that the victim verbally process the psychologist’s input. This process necessitates that the victim communicates their experiences and emotional states. If speech processing and language comprehension abilities have changed as a result of verbal violence, then we need to do better at identifying these individuals so as to more effectively address their neurobiological differences. This highlights the need to differentiate verbal abuse from the more familiar psychological and emotional abuse.

So is verbal abuse on our intervention radar? Not really.

The current 2013 ‘Code of Practice for the NSW Police Force Response to Domestic and Family Violence’, omits verbal violence.

In conclusion, In the contexts of domestic, family and elder abuse the old adage “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me,” needs to be put firmly out of our minds.

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