The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease
The Hidden Epidemic
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The Hidden Epidemic

Edited by

Ruth A. Lanius
Associate Professor, University of Western Ontario, Canada

Eric Vermetten
Associate Professor, University Medical Center and Military Mental Health, Central Military Hospital, Utrecht, the Netherlands

Clare Pain
Associate Professor, University of Toronto, Canada
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Judith Herman

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Contributors

Jon G. Allen, PhD
The Menninger Clinic
Houston, TX, USA

Robert Anda, MD, MS
Carter Consulting Inc.
Atlanta, GA, USA

Susan L. Andersen, PhD
Department of Psychiatry
Harvard Medical School
Laboratory of Developmental Neuropharmacology
McLean Hospital
Belmont, MA, USA

Carl M. Anderson, PhD
Department of Psychiatry
Harvard Medical School
Brain Imaging Center and Developmental Biopsychiatry Research Program
McLean Hospital
Belmont, MA, USA

Wendy d'Andrea
Trauma Center
Brookline, MA, USA

Tal Astrachan, PsyD
Victims of Violence Program
Department of Psychiatry
Cambridge Health Alliance
Harvard Medical School
Cambridge, MA, USA

Anthony W. Bateman, MA, FRCPsych
St. Ann’s Hospital, Halliwick Unit
London, UK

Carla Bernardes, PhD
Department of Psychology
Victims of Violence Program
Cambridge Health Alliance
Harvard Medical School
Cambridge, MA, USA

Renato Borgatti
Department of Child and Adolescent Neurology and Psychiatry
Scientific Institute “E. Medea”
Lecco, Italy

Bekh Bradley, PhD
Atlanta VA Medical Center
Decatur, GA, USA

J. Douglas Bremner, MD
Departments of Psychiatry and Radiology
Emory University School of Medicine
Clinical Neuroscience Research Unit, Psychiatry & Behavioral Science
Atlanta VAMC,
Atlanta, GA, USA

John Briere, PhD
Departments of Psychiatry and Psychology
Psychological Trauma Program
Keck School of Medicine
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA, USA

Amy F. Buckley, Phd
PTSD and Anxiety Disorders Division
Cincinnati VA Medical Center
Cincinnati, OH, USA

Jean-Francois Bureau, PhD
School of Psychology
University of Ottawa
Ottawa, ON, Canada

Kathleen M. Chard
PTSD and Anxiety Disorders Division
Cincinnati VA Medical Center
Cincinnati, OH, USA

Dennis Charney, MD
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
Department of Psychiatry
New York, NY, USA

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More information
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of contributors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Anthony Charuvastra**, MD  
NYU Child Study Center Trauma and Resilience Research Program  
Nathan S. Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research  
NYU Child Study Center  
New York, NY, USA | **Erin C. Dunn**, MPH  
Harvard School of Public Health  
Department of Society, Human Development, and Health, Boston, MA, USA |
| **Jeewook Choi**, MD, PhD  
Department of Psychiatry  
The Catholic University of Korea  
Daejeon St. Mary’s Hospital  
Jung-gu, Daejeon, Korea | **Vincent J. Felitti**, MD  
Kaiser Permanente Medical Care Program, and University of California School of Medicine  
San Diego, CA, USA |
| **Marylene Cloitre**, PhD  
Trauma and Resilience Research Program, Child Study Center  
Department of Psychiatry  
New York University School of Medicine  
NY, USA | **Philip A. Fisher**, PhD  
Department of Psychology, University of Oregon  
Senior Research Scientist, Oregon Social Learning Center  
Eugene, OR, USA |
| **Melody D. Combs**, PhD  
The Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect  
The Gary Pavilion at The Children's Hospital  
Anschutz Medical Campus  
Aurora, CO, USA | **Peter Fonagy**, PhD  
The Anna Freud Centre  
London, UK |
| **Constance J. Dalenberg** PhD  
Trauma Research Institute, Alliant International University  
San Diego, CA, USA | **Julian D. Ford**, PhD  
Department of Psychiatry  
University of Connecticut School of Medicine, Farmington, CT, USA |
| **Martin J. Dorahy** PhD, DClinPsych  
Department of Psychology  
University of Canterbury  
Christchurch, New Zealand | **Amit Goldenberg**  
Hebrew University  
Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, Israel |
| **Michael D. De Bellis** MD, MPH  
Healthy Childhood  
Brain Development and Developmental Traumatology Research Program  
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences  
Duke University Medical Center  
Durham, NC, USA | **Megan R. Gunnar**, PhD  
Institute of Child Development  
University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis, MN, USA |
| **Anne P. DePrince**, PhD  
University of Denver  
Psychology Department  
Denver, CO, USA | **Udi Harari**  
Hebrew University  
Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, Israel |
| **Christine Heim** PhD  
Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences  
Emory University School of Medicine  
Atlanta, GA, USA | **Felicia Heidenreich**  
Transcultural Research and Intervention Team (TRIT)  
CSSS de la Montagne  
Montréal, QC, Canada |
List of contributors

Judith Herman MD
Victims of Violence Program
Department of Psychiatry
Cambridge Health Alliance
Cambridge, MA, USA

Monica Hodges, PhD
Department of Psychology
California State University
Long Beach CA, USA

Shlomit Jacobson-Pick, PhD
Institute of Neuroscience
Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

Joan Kaufman, PhD
Yale University School of Medicine
Department of Psychiatry
Yale University New Haven, CT, USA

Karestan C. Koenen, PhD
Harvard School of Public Health
Departments of Society, Human Development, and Health & Epidemiology
Boston, MA, USA

Ruth A. Lanius, MD, PhD
Harris-Woodman Chair
Department of Psychiatry
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

Jamie L. LaPrairie MS PhD
Emory University Department of Psychology
Women's Mental Health Program
Emory University School of Medicine
Atlanta, GA, USA

Alicia F. Lieberman, PhD
Department of Psychiatry
University of California San Francisco, and Child Trauma Research Program
San Francisco General Hospital
San Francisco, CA, USA

Richard J. Loewenstein, MD
The Trauma Disorders Program
Sheppard Pratt Health System
Department of Psychiatry
University of Maryland School of Medicine
Baltimore, MD, USA

Sonia J. Lupien MD
Hôpital Louis-H. Lafontaine
Centre d'études sur le stress humain
Montréal QC, Canada

Karlen Lyons-Ruth, PhD
Department of Psychology
Harvard Medical School
Department of Psychiatry
Cambridge Health Alliance
Cambridge, MA, USA

Jodi Martin, BA
School of Psychology
University of Ottawa
Ottawa, ON, Canada

Bruce McEwen, PhD
The Rockefeller University
Harold and Margaret Milliken Hatch Laboratory of Neuroendocrinology
New York, NY, USA

Alexander C. McFarlane MB BS (Hons), MD, FRANZCP, Dip Psychotherapy
Department of Psychiatry
CMVH University of Adelaide Node
Department of MEAO DHSP studies
The Centre for Military and Veteranés Health
The University of Adelaide
Adelaide, Australia

Warwick Middleton MBBS FRANZCP, MD
School of Public Health,
La Trade University
Trauma and Dissociation Unit
Belmont Hospital, Bristane
Queensland, Australia

Rosario Montiroso
Department of Child and Adolescent Neurology and Psychiatry
Scientific Institute
“E. Medea,” Lecco, Italy

Charles B. Nemeroff, PhD
Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences
Emory University School of Medicine
Atlanta, GA, USA
List of contributors

Pat Ogden, PhD
Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute
Boulder, CO, USA

Fatih Ozbay, MD
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
Department of Psychiatry
New York, NY, USA

Clare Pain MD, MSc, FRCPC
Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto
Psychological Trauma Program, Mount Sinai
Hospital, Toronto Addis Ababa Psychiatry Project
(TAAPP), Toronto Addis Ababa
Academic Collaboration (TAAAC) Mount Sinai
Hospital, Joseph and Wolf Lebovic Health Complex
room 934,Toronto, ON, Canada

Kelsey Paulson
Alliant International University
San Diego, CA, USA

Oxana G. Palesh, PhD, MPH
Department of Radiation Oncology and
Department of Psychiatry
University of Rochester Medical Center
James P. Wilmot Cancer Center
Rochester, NY, USA

Ms. Keren Rabi
Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology
Child and Adolescent Program
McLean Hospital
Belmont, MA, USA

Gal Richter-Levin, PhD
Department of Neurobiology and Ethology and
Department of Psychology University of Haifa, Haifa
31905 Israel

Andrea L. Roberts, PhD
Harvard School of Public Health
Department of Society,
Human Development, and Health
Boston, MA, USA

Cécile Rousseau, MD
Department of Psychiatry
McGill University
Montréal, QC, Canada

Cécile Rousseau, MD
Division of Social and Cultural Psychiatry
McGill University
Transcultural Research and Intervention Team (TRIT)
Youth Mental Health
CSSS de la Montagne
Montréal, QC, Canada

Monica Ruiz-Casares
Transcultural Research and Intervention Team (TRIT)
CSSS de la Montagne
Montréal, QC, Canada

Christian Schmahl, MD
Department of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy, Central Institute of Mental Health
Mannheim, Germany

Allan N. Schore, PhD
Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences
University of California at Los Angeles
David Geffen School of Medicine
Northridge, CA, USA

Sally B. Seraphin, PhD
Developmental Biopsychiatry Research Program
McLean Hospital
Belmont, MA, USA

Vansh Sharma, MD
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
Department of Psychiatry
New York, NY, USA

Yi-Shin Sheu, BS
Psychological and Brain Sciences Program
The Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD, USA

Kelly Skelton, MD, PhD
Atlanta VA Medical Center
Decatur, GA, USA

Steven Southwick, MD
Yale University School of Medicine
Department of Psychiatry
New Haven, CT, USA
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of contributors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>David Spiegel, MD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Psychiatry &amp; Behavioral Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University School of Medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford, CA, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deborah M. Stone, ScD, MSW, MPH</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvard School of Public Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Society, Human Development, and Health</td>
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<td>Boston, MA, USA</td>
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<td><strong>Nathan Szajnberg, MD</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hebrew University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, Israel</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Martin H. Teicher, MD, PhD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Psychiatry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harvard Medical School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developmental Biopsychiatry Research Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>McLean Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belmont, MA, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Akemi Tomoda, MD, PhD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Child Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Life Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumamoto University, Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ed Tronick, PhD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Development Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's Hospital Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston, MA, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Onno van der Hart, PhD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Clinical and Health Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utrecht University, Utrecht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bessel A. van der Kolk, MD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Psychiatry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston University School of Medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma Center, Brookline, MA, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eric Vermetten, MD, PhD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Military Mental Health Central Military Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMC Utrecht, Rudolf Magnus Institute of Neuroscience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utrecht, Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tamara Weiss, MD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emory University School of Medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta, GA, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Victor Welzant, PsyD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towson, MD, USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword

In my beginning is my end.

T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets

If you were given a newborn infant with all his or her extraordinary potential, and were directed to turn that infant into a school shooter in 15 years, or a mainlining addict in 20, how would you do that? In spite of distaste for the question, obviously at some level we know how to do that. A more general and less disturbing question is how do we get to be who we are as human beings – and as patients? That general question has been with us since ancient times. Gods and fate were our explanation throughout most of history. The answer has been refined in relatively recent times, actually coextensive with the quite recent time line of the germ theory, first by poets and then by psychoanalysts, who helped us to see how human development is powerfully influenced by emotionally traumatic early life experiences. More recently still, epidemiologists and neurobiologists have led the explorations.

Traumatic events of the earliest years of infancy and childhood are not lost but, like a child's footprints in wet cement, are often preserved lifelong. Time does not heal the wounds that occur in those earliest years; time conceals them. They are not lost; they are embodied. Only in recent decades has the magnitude of the problem of developmentally damaged humans begun to be recognized and understood. The limits of that understanding, and the resistance to it, are captured well in this book's title, The Hidden Epidemic. There is in those words the obvious implication of something causing a serious and widespread threat to health and well-being, but they also offer a paradox, subtly leading us to wonder why an epidemic would be hidden, and how? Compared with the questions asked during most of human history, and even those asked today by physicians in their medical histories, the questions of The Hidden Epidemic are extraordinary and bold.

The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic summarizes our current approaches to understanding how we become the people we are: not only as biological entities, but also as truly human beings with an outer persona and an inner soul. Just as we observe how a leg damaged in childhood sometimes does not grow to its full potential, this book asks how does a persona or a soul become damaged? Why are we all not perfect, or at least similar? Why are only some of us suicides, or addicts, or obese, or criminals? Why do some of us die early while others live long? What is the nature of the scream on the other side of silence? What does it mean that some memories are unspeakable, forgotten or lost in amnesia – and does it matter? Is there a hidden price being paid for this comfort of remaining unaware? What are the basic causes of these phenomena, and what are the mechanisms by which they occur? Do our current ways of medical understanding limit us as physicians? Are they actually a part of the problem? One of the authors proposes a new diagnostic strategy that involves considering the very earliest external influences, certainly including parenting, a role of enormous power whether by its presence, absence or dysfunctional performance. Other authors provide evidence that some of our most common problems in biomedicine and mental health are the result of unconsciously attempted solutions to problems dating back to the earliest years, but hidden by time, by shame, by secrecy and by social taboos against exploring certain areas of life experience. It is becoming evident that traumatic life experiences during childhood and adolescence are far more common than usually recognized, are complexly inter-related and are associated decades later in a strong and proportionate manner to outcomes that are important to medical practice, public health and the social fabric of a nation.

Biomedical researchers have helped us to recognize that childhood events, specifically abuse and emotional trauma even in the earliest years, have profound and enduring effects on the neuroregulatory systems mediating medical illness as well as social behavior from childhood into adult life. Our understanding of the connection between emotional trauma in childhood and the pathways to biomedical and psychopathology in adulthood is still being formed as neuroscientists begin to describe the changes that take place on the molecular level as a result of events or ongoing states of life that occurred hours, months or decades earlier.
The editors have paid attention to all parts of our enquiry into the significance of the earliest years of human development: to the roles of abuse and attachment, to genetics and to the epigenetic effects of parenting and other experiences of early life that lead to phenotypic plasticity, to the distinctly partial process of resiliency, and to diagnosis and treatment. The chapter authors, a mix of the internationally distinguished and those on a clearly rising trajectory, provide a blend of clinical observation and highly specific technical information in this bold attempt to bring together what is becoming known by clinical study and by sophisticated technical approaches such as functional imaging. They help us to see how neuroscience and biological psychiatry are now identifying the intermediary mechanisms by which clinical states manifest themselves. The turning point in modern understanding of the role of trauma in medical and psychiatric pathology is commonly credited to Freud, who lived within the lifetimes of many of us, as did Rene Spitz and Harry Harlow with their groundbreaking work on maternal deprivation. Would that they had lived a bit longer to see where we are taking their work.

We are beginning to have remarkable insight into how we become what we are as individuals and as a nation. This understanding is important medically, socially and economically. Indeed, it has given us reason to reconsider the very structure of medical, public health, and social services practice in the USA. We are even beginning to see some of our diagnoses as medical constructs, artifacts resulting from medical blindness to the social realities of life experiences, especially those of infancy and early childhood.

One hopes we will do ourselves proud in these years following the “decade of the brain.” But, as with any major advance in knowledge, there is risk of misunderstanding and misuse. T. S. Eliot described this risk in his lines from The Rock:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

As physicians, we typically focus our attention on tertiary consequences, far downstream, while primary causes are well protected by time, by social convention and by taboo. We have often limited ourselves to the smallest part of the problem, that part in which we are erudite and comfortable as mere prescribers of medication, or users of impressive technologies. The hidden epidemic is a problem not only for psychiatry, but also for medicine and for society in general. Perhaps greater than the risk of misunderstanding or misusing what we are learning is the risk of comfortably not using it at all. Integration of these new discoveries into everyday medical practice is our next big step. Accomplishing that will broaden our experience base sufficiently to allow the beginning of primary prevention for much of physical and mental illness. One already suspects from some of the chapters in this volume that improving parenting skills will be a core feature of primary prevention in the future of medicine and psychiatry.

To the degree that we do not figure out how to integrate this knowledge into everyday clinical practice, we contribute to the problem by authenticating as biomedical disease that which is actually the somatic inscription of life experience on to the human body and brain. The influence of childhood experience, including often-unrecognized traumatic events, is as powerful as Freud and his colleagues originally described it to be. That influence is long lasting, and the researchers in this volume are now describing the intermediary mechanisms, the neural pathways, that these stressors activate for their clinical manifestation. Unfortunately, and in spite of these findings, the biopsychosocial model and the biomedical models of psychiatry remain largely at odds rather than taking advantage of the new discoveries to reinforce each other.

Many of our most intractable public health problems are the result of compensatory behaviors such as smoking, overeating, promiscuity, and alcohol and drug use, which provide immediate partial relief from emotional problems caused by traumatic childhood experiences. That relationship is straightforward: early trauma to depression or anxiety, to obesity, to diabetes, to heart disease; trauma to smoking, to emphysema or lung cancer. But, apart from various common compensatory actions, the chronic life stress of the underlying developmental life experiences is generally unrecognized and hence unappreciated as a second and separate etiological mechanism underlying many biomedical diseases.

In a convincing call for a new theory, The Hidden Epidemic provides the credible basis for a new paradigm of medical, public health, and social service practice that would start with comprehensive biopsychosocial evaluation of all patients. It has been demonstrated that this approach is acceptable to patients, can be affordable, and is beneficial in multiple ways. The potential
gain is huge, and is of major significance at a time when there is great political interest in the cost and processes of medical care. Also huge is the likelihood of clinician and institutional resistance to this change. Actualizing the benefits of this paradigm shift will depend on first identifying and resolving the various bases for resistance to it. In reality, this will require far more planning than would be needed to introduce a purely intellectual or technical advance. However, our experience suggests that it can be done. Doing so will likely be the major public health advance of our time.

Vincent J. Felitti
Kaiser Permanente Medical Care Program, San Diego
Clinical Professor of Medicine, University of California
Acknowledgements

We began working on this book in the spring of 2006 after a memorable lunch in New York. For some years, the three of us had been attending conferences, where we listened to and met senior colleagues in the fields of developmental psychology, epidemiology, genetics, attachment theory, clinical psychiatry, sociology, and neuroscience. Their commitment to the study and research of early life trauma inspired us to capture and integrate it in this edited book. We have tried to present our author's material in a new manner that organizes and simplifies the content areas to be reader friendly. The book has three sections, and each section is divided into two parts. After each part there is a synopsis, each written by senior authors who have reviewed, commented, and reflected on the respective chapters in each section. These synopses serve as “salt and pepper” for the book.

We would like to acknowledge and thank our colleagues for their generous mentoring, teaching, and research. Many of them kindly submitted a chapter for the book. We thank Douglas Bremner for his phrase “the hidden epidemic” which we have included in the title. We also thank Cambridge University Press who trusted us to provide them with a book to print. Special thanks also to the staff at Cambridge University Press, including Pauline Graham, Betty Fulford, Laura Wood, Joanna Souter, Mark Boyd, Jane Ward, and Joanna Endell-Cooper, who, at various stages of the production process, provided their expertise and assistance. We are much indebted to Richard Marley who allowed us a significant increase in the word allowance which gives this volume the weight it now has. A very special thanks goes to Nancy Mazza for her superb assistance in the various stages of the project, and to Gabriel Shapiro who kindly and expertly worked on the first round of edits.

We also want to recognize our own students who have taught us to be better teachers, and most importantly, we acknowledge our patients to whom this book is dedicated. They have inspired us with their courage in the face of suffering and their perseverance towards recovery.

It is our hope that this book will go toward improving the recognition, assessment, treatment, pedagogy, ongoing research, and public health response to the prevention of early life trauma and reduce the deleterious effects of this hidden epidemic.

London, Utrecht, Toronto
May 14, 2010
Ruth Lanius
Eric Vermetten
Clare Pain