

Understanding Trauma

Allegheny HealthChoices, Inc.

This is one of several recovery stories that trauma survivors and providers shared with us as we developed the Understanding Trauma Report.

Psychiatrist Finds Unconditional Support Helps Patients

I learned about the *practice* of psychiatry from my professors in medical school and psychiatric residency training. I continue to learn about the *art* of medicine from my patients who share with me the depths of their suffering and through whom I recognize the importance of a genuine and caring relationship in facilitating and promoting change.

One woman in particular helped to open my eyes to the devastating and myriad effects of childhood trauma and my role in her recovery. While accompanying her on her journey of discovery and recovery with several other care providers, I embarked on my own journey of exploration of early childhood trauma, its consequences and treatment.

As her memories came to her one by one, I explored the

controversy around repressed traumatic memories. As she struggled with nightmares and awoke in fear night after night, I studied the chemical and neurologic changes that occur in the brain with PTSD. As she sat in my office having rapid changes in her mood, speech and demeanor, appearing disconnected and fragmented, I learned about dissociation and Dissociative Identity Disorder.

She has made great progress with her therapist in discovering her parts and working to integrate their fragmented memories, emotions and roles. When I asked her how our work together helped her, she indicated the caring relationship that supported her unconditionally in her trauma therapy.

I now ask all my patients about traumatic experiences, and I am no longer surprised

by the high frequency of positive responses. Understanding and acknowledging this aspect of a patient's history and providing a safe and compassionate environment in which to address these experiences directly can positively impact the treatment and outcome.

Providing the opportunity to have restorative relationships is an important ingredient to helping trauma survivors move along the path of healing and recovery.

By Stephanie Richards, MD