

Emotional Trauma Can Be a Disability

Elida Reyes

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. A *trauma* (noun) is a very stressful or disturbing experience that breaks your sense of security. It could happen once or repeatedly. *Traumatic* is the adjective form of the word. Try using both words in a sentence.
2. Read the title and the headings. What do you think this article will be about?

My Mother Treated Me Harshly

My disability started when I was a child. My mother verbally and physically abused me. When I spoke, she would tell me that everything I said was garbage. She told me to shut up, and she hit me. She even told me that she regretted that I was born. I didn't understand why other people in the world were kinder to me than my own mother. The person who was supposed to love me would treat me so harshly.

This abuse was *traumatic* for me. It has stayed with me throughout my life. It has led me to live my life in survival mode. For example, when I was 19, I just wanted to get away from my toxic family, so I married a man who was not at all right for me.

My mother's treatment of me left me with an emotional disability. It is an invisible disability, but it has affected me deeply. It has made it difficult for me to live a full life.

Scared to Use My Voice

In addition to my emotional disability, I did not receive a good education. No one encouraged me to go to school. My grandmother and mother didn't go to school. There were no books in my home. My relatives were uneducated. The Spanish that we spoke in my house was very basic.

When my children started school, I also went to school. I studied English at the Center for



Community Education. I needed to learn English so that I could at least follow instructions. I felt incompetent, powerless, and unworthy. I could not communicate complicated ideas and emotions in English or Spanish. I felt scared to use my voice to express myself or stand up for myself.

Beginning to Learn

My disability has had many consequences. Now that my children are adults, I have gathered the courage to go back to school. I was afraid to come back to school again because I doubted whether I could learn. Now I can express myself more precisely with the new words I am learning, and that feels good. But it's been a struggle because of my self-doubt.

Now that I am not in survival mode, I have also learned about myself. One painful lesson is finding out how my disability affected my children.

Because I was uneducated, I wanted my children to have the advantage of a good education. I made sure I gave my children a stable home and didn't let them miss school. I made sure that they did their homework and read. But my lack of trust led me to be very strict. When it came to kids their own age, I was scared that they would become part of the wrong crowd, so I didn't let them have friends over. I was so scared they would turn out just like me – uneducated, emotionally disabled, a single parent.

Listening to My Children

In spite of my good intentions, I did some damage. My adult children are now telling me that I didn't nurture them or help them to process their feelings. They say I was too strict, and I expected too much of them. They say that I needed them to be more grown up than they were ready to be. For instance, my daughter had to teach me to write checks, because I didn't know how. So, I realize that in spite of all my efforts to overcome my own trauma, I had not fully healed, and my children were affected. It's very painful, but I am listening to them.

What I want to say is that emotional disabilities are debilitating, just as physical disabilities are. And if emotional *trauma* isn't recognized and healed, some of it can be passed on to the next generation.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What did Elida's mother do that was emotionally abusive and traumatic for Elida?
2. Elida says that her mother left her with an emotional disability. How has this emotional disability affected her? Be specific.
3. According to the author, how can emotional trauma be passed down to the next generation?



Elida Reyes is a student at Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York City. It is part of the CUNY Adult Literacy Program. She lives in Manhattan and is a passionate learner whose first language is Spanish. She is proud to share her voice through writing.