

# Complexities in Treating Trauma

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# Overview

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- PTSD
  - Intergenerational transmission
  - Avoidance
  - Encoding of memory
- Narrative Exposure Therapy
  - Cases

# Trauma and its psychological sequelae

- Range of psychological responses
  - Acute and longer term implications
  - Associations with anxiety disorders, depression, substance misuse, adjustment problems
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
  - Reaction to a life-threatening disorder
  - Encompasses an increasing range of events and human reactions across different cultures
  - ?cross-cultural medicalisation of normal human emotions

# PTSD – diagnosis DSM 5

- Stressor
  - direct exposure; witnessed; indirect- close relative or friend; repeated indirect exposure (course of professional duties)
- Intrusive memories (re-experiencing)
  - Repeating reliving of the trauma
  - Flashbacks, dreams/nightmares
- Negative alterations in cognitions and mood
  - Numbness, emotional blunting
- Avoidance of stimuli that might arouse recollection of the trauma- *effortful avoidance*
- Alterations in arousal and reactivity
  - Hypervigilance; exaggerated startle
  - Insomnia

# Intergenerational effects

- Studies across disciplines
- Parenting
  - Clusters of adversities cascade across generations
  - Disruption to parenting role
  - Parental mental illness
  - Aggression in families



Instagram



humansofny



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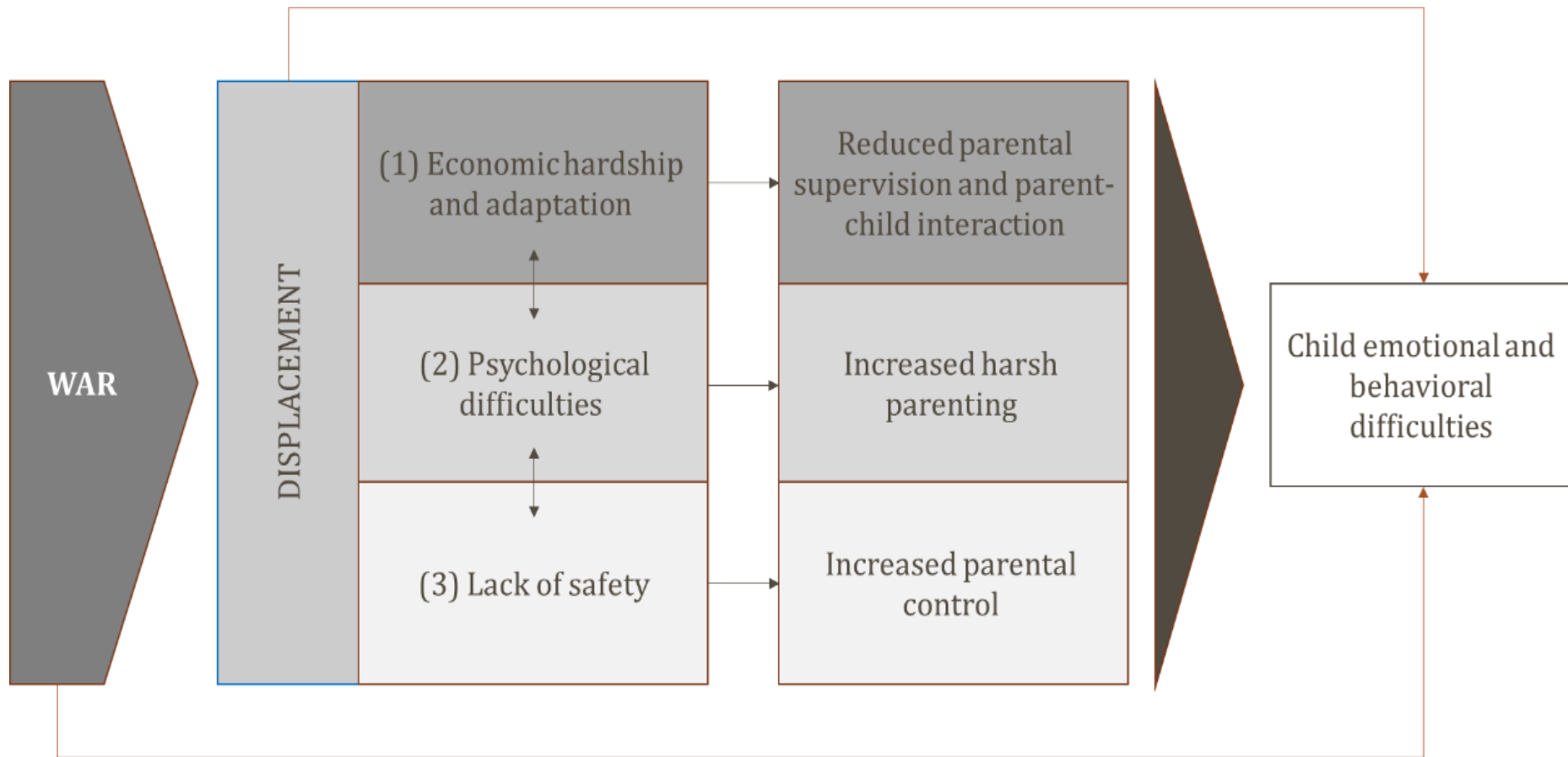
**humansofny** (1/2) "My childhood was dominated by her stories: living in the ghetto for two years, surviving off potato peels, running like an animal from the Nazis. She was the only one who survived.

I have no grandparents. No aunts or uncles. Her entire family was killed. We rose up from the ashes. And my mother became a monster. She deprived us like she was deprived. My brother and I were always made to feel like a burden. Like we were leeching from her. There were no special occasions. No birthdays. No cake. Everything was counted. Everything was calculated. Whenever I asked for something, I was made to feel responsible for World War II. She'd say: 'I didn't survive Hitler to get you a bag of potato chips.' She never let me feel like we were in America. I felt like I was the one wearing stripes. I've dreamed about Hitler since I was child. He tells me I'm a mistake. And that I should have been killed. I remember when I grew older and started visiting the houses of friends. I saw how their parents treated them. How they were given gifts. And how they were loved. It felt like I was crawling out of the sewer, after the war, and learning that this entire time-- some people had been living normal lives."

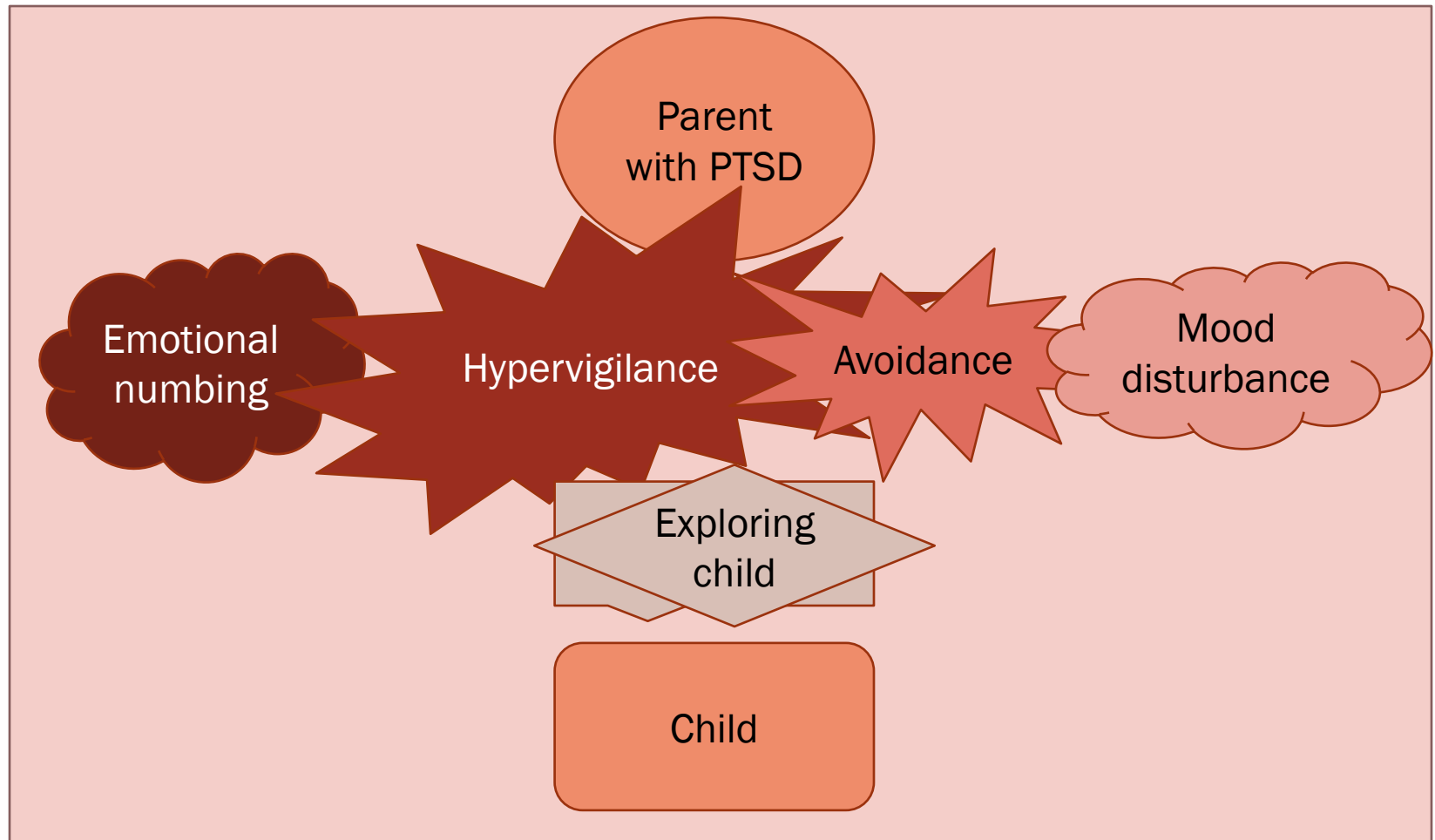
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# Pathways linking war and displacement to parenting and child adjustment



# Parental PTSD: Mechanisms of intergenerational transmission





# Avoidance 1

- For the individual
  - Many effective treatments are exposure based
  - Comorbid psychological and physical disorders, especially if untreated
- For their carers
  - Buffering role of parents
  - Impaired interpersonal relationships
  - Parenting style less encouraging of independence
  - Family social withdrawal: avoidance in dealing with child's distress
  - Emotional regulation and harsher parenting styles

# Avoidance 2

- Therapeutic
  - Stability
  - Training and supervision
  - Case load
- Intervention research
  - Treatment of family systems
- Broader societal responsibilities
  - Social fabric
  - Supportive environments

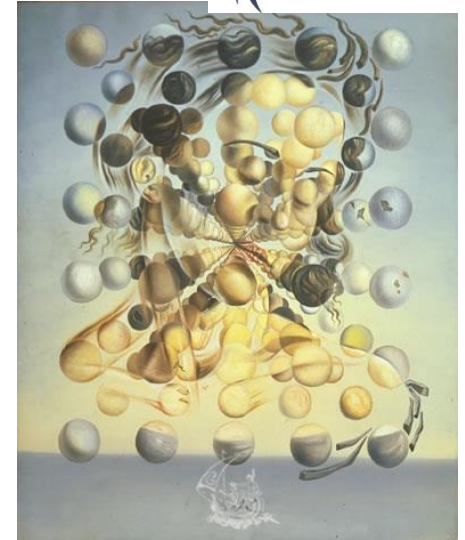
# Treatments

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Narrative Exposure Therapy

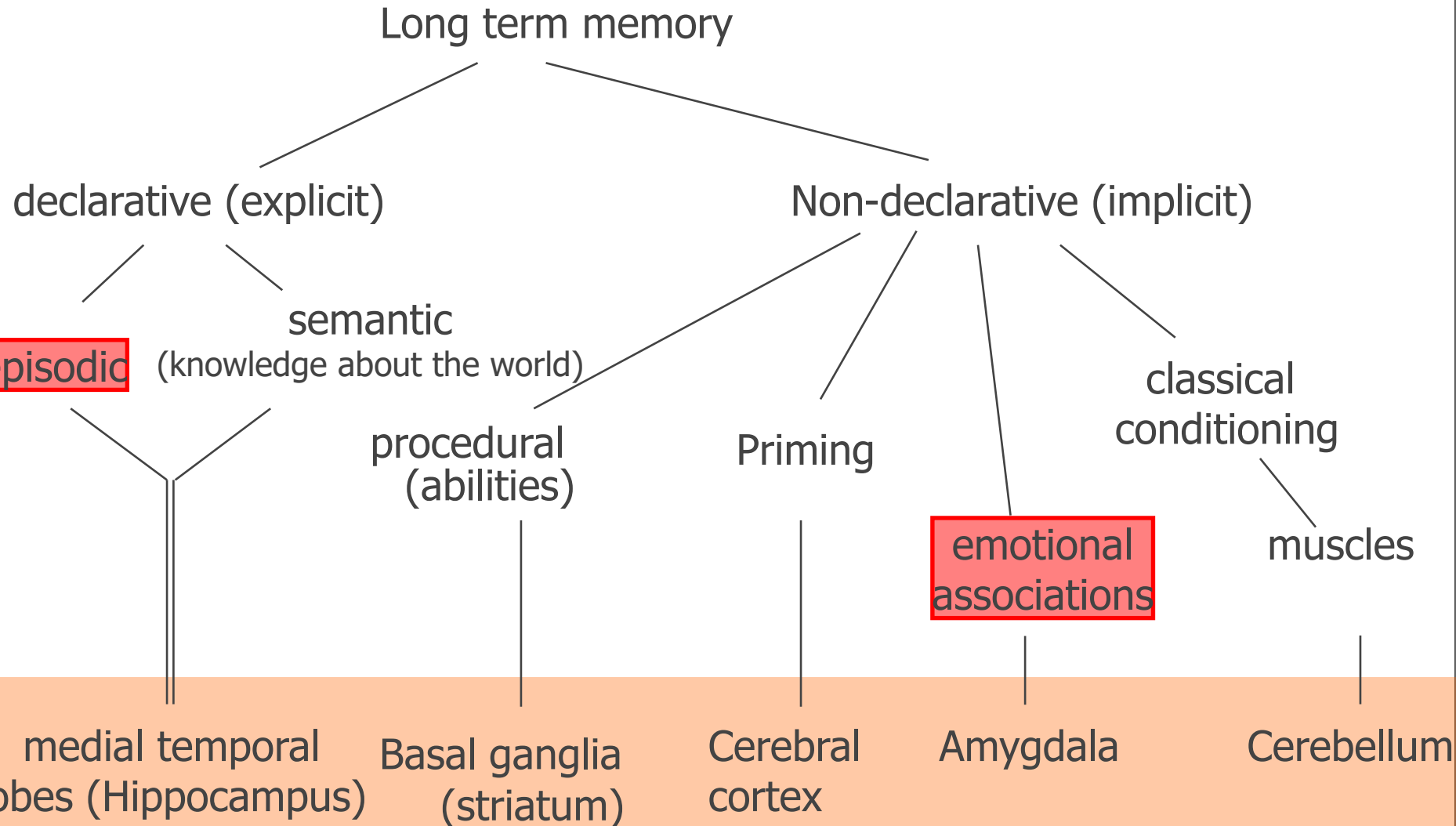
# Trauma narratives

- no chronological order
- fragmented memories
- difficulties putting the experiences into words



Symptoms of PTSD are based on a pathological representation of traumatic experiences

# Taxonomy of Memory



# Autobiographic memory

Knowledge about  
lifetime periods

Knowledge about  
general events

Knowledge about  
specific events

**Cold Memory**

Event specific  
emotional-sensory  
network

**Hot Memory**

**NARRATION**



# Nature of memory

## Non-declarative memory (Hot Memory)

- Automatically activated by cues
- Sensory, emotional & physiological perceptions
- Fragmentary reports
- Sensation of "Here and Now"

Amygdala

## Declarative memory (Cold memory)

- Deliberately retrievable
- Knowledge about the event in the context of life, time & space
- Chronological report

Hippocampus

# Cases

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# 1. Autism Spectrum Disorder and Psychosis

- ASD and intellectual disability (FSIQ 72, 3rd centile)
  - poor expressive and receptive language
- PTSD following sexual and physical abuse by sports instructor when aged 9-11
- Identified flashbacks, rumination, nightmares, and distress at reminders on assessment.

After going through something stressful, your brain tries it's best to manage. But it might mean you hear and see stuff all over again.

If you're really stressed this can turn into visions and voices. If you worry about this over and over you can then become very paranoid.

This affects your mood and sleep and this makes the voices and visions worse. This could be called ~~pt~~ psychosis.

Altho all though it feels very real to you. It's just the past haunting you. it can't hurt you now.

There is treatment & support available.

It's understandable why your brain is doing this. You aren't mad your brain isn't broken.

## 2. Engagement with treatment

- Physical trauma, father in prison for abusing sibling
- Initially treated for depression and anxiety but by 3<sup>rd</sup> month evidence comorbid PTSD
- Liked idea of a lifeline
  - Only agreed to do this initially
  - Needed longer to trust an adult when coming to trauma experiences vs talking about depression
  - Lifeline in itself made some of the experiences clearer
  - Non-threatening and simple
  - Cathartic
  - Took some months before decided to start the narration

# Conclusions

- Unacceptable levels of untreated PTSD
- Access to services
- Avoidance plays out on many levels
- Access to training

# Thanks

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