Hi Elliot,

Maia had passed on your note and request for a presentation on the relationship between trauma and addiction.  Apologies for not getting back to you sooner. I’m not sure if we would necessarily be able to provide you with the kind of presentation you might be looking for here.  We’re not experts in trauma, though we certainly appreciate the role that trauma plays in the many variables that shape the trajectory of problematic substance use.

Your request got me thinking and for what it’s worth here’s how I think about the connection. How to understand the fact that a trauma in one person’s life can follow a certain trajectory (including addiction) while the next person experiencing the same trauma adapts quite well with little if any long term impact?  To use the rat park analogy, if you put two rats through the same trauma and immediately place one rat in the rat park and one rat in the isolated cage what happens next?  So to my mind the vulnerability to long term negative trauma impacts (including drug addiction) is all about the quality of the relationship environment (family relationships in the human world) and the capacity of the relationship system to support the individual with the trauma experience.  Therefore trauma doesn’t “cause” addiction rather it is in the maladaptive relationship response to trauma that increases vulnerability to addiction (and other symptoms).

This has clinical implications for how one might work with a child who has experienced trauma.  From my clinical lense the effort is directed to the caregivers in coaching them to provide the child with the right kind of response.  In other words you target the relationship system rather than the traumatised individual (notwithstanding support for child).  Anyway this is the thinking that is behind our efforts to engage with parents whenever possible in an effort to address the relational factors that underpin many of these problematic substance use symptoms.  Such an interesting topic don’t you think?  Best wishes, Douglas