

LITTLE *t*'s and BIG *T*'s

'*T*' stands for 'trauma'. Big *T*'s are really bad experiences that have lasting effects. Little *t*'s are events that may feel upsetting but not enough to be considered a 'major trauma' or a Big *T*. Still, in many cases, repeated Little *t*'s can cause more emotional harm than a single Big *T*.

Adverse events experienced as traumatic may increase the risk of developing addiction, substance use, mental health problems, and post-traumatic stress, especially if they occur during the brain's development.

Trauma Is in the Eye of the Beholder

The person who experiences the event is the one who defines how big or little the impact was or whether they would label it traumatic or not. Some examples of both are listed in categories on the next page, although ultimately each individual decides which category their experience falls in.

What is highly distressing to one person is subjective, and the same event may be 'no biggie' to someone else and may result in a different emotional, cognitive, or behavioral response.

A group or family may experience the same negative event, but each individual views it differently based on their own reactions, feelings, and even opinions. Two siblings may go through the same incident and perceive it in uniquely different ways, simply because of the difference in their ages and corresponding brain development.

Stress Responses Differ

One predictor of how 'traumatic' an event will be experienced lies in how much an individual's stress response is activated. A stress response is the internal activation of the central nervous system when a threat or challenge is perceived. Known as the fight, flight, freeze, or fawning (befriending) response, this reaction includes the release of substances like adrenaline and the stress hormone cortisol.

The long-term effect of adverse events depends on the intensity, length, and nature of the activated stress response. If a stressor or bad experience is prolonged and elicits extreme fear or anger, causing an individual to dissociate or become hyperaroused, the effects may endure. On the other hand, if the stressor or bad experience is perceived as predictable or controllable, the stress response and aftereffects may be moderate and short-lived.

Little t Events

- Bullying
- Emotional abuse/neglect
- Emotional abandonment
- Divorce
- Non-life-threatening injury
- Harassment
- Death of a pet
- Loss of significant relationship
- Sudden loss of job
- Gaslighting
- Spiritual abuse
- Family mental health issue
- Enmeshment
- Isolation
- Discrimination
- Family chaos or fighting
- Family member in jail

Big T Events

- Witnessing violence
- Experiencing violence
- Physical abandonment
- Neglect of basic care
- Natural disaster
- Life-threatening event
- Witnessing a death
- Sexual violence/abuse
- War or combat
- Emotional or sexual incest
- Threat of serious injury
- Death of a loved one
- Marginalization
- Witnessing sibling abuse
- Exposure to racism
- Alcoholic parent
- Domestic violence
- Foster care involvement

These are examples. Each individual ultimately decides which category their experience falls in.

Acknowledge the Wound

Sometimes, the first step is acknowledging that events occurring in our FOO meet our own definition of traumatic, little or big. Or, we may need to simply appreciate and concede that the experiences left an emotional mark or wound regardless of their size and intensity.

Struggling to acknowledge the impact of FOO experiences and events is common. Many people think, 'But my mother did the best she could.' Or 'My father fed us and clothed us. What more could I expect?' Although these statements may be true, the danger is hidden within the minimization.

Minimizing the impact of these events may serve as obstacles in your FOO journey, shutting down the deep digging that will be needed ahead.