

Grief, Trauma and The Curious Case of Tattoos and Piercings As Coping Mechanism in the World of Mental Health

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Abstract- Research between grief, trauma and tattoos and piercings was explored and examined to understand and critique any possible relationship between tattoos and piercings amidst grief and trauma as means of coping mechanisms for healing, hope and help among individuals.

Tattoos as well as piercings are becoming increasingly more present and perpetually popular in many cities, cultures and countries around the world regardless of the usual standard demographics of age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and beliefs. In the U.S., individuals seeking such body modifications have commonly reported diverse psychological motives, goals and objectives. A qualitative study consisting of archival surveys was applied to assess and evaluate the relevance and possible link between trauma, tattoos and piercings and the capacity to achieve coping for healing, hope and help.

As tattoos and piercings are becoming increasingly popular and present among societal cultures, those who seek to obtain such often convey diverse motives. Tattoos and piercings have significant and intense personal relevance and meaning. Far too often there is a lack of studies that examine possible links between tattoos and piercings with experiences of childhood abuse and neglect. There is growing evidence of relationships between traumatic loss and tattoos and piercings. Equally essential and worth noting is that not all loss is traumatic, but all trauma involves loss.

The results of this study indicate tattoos and piercings are frequent and more common among individuals who report a history or life of experiences involving childhood abuse, trauma, neglect, and victimization. The proportion of participants with tattoos and piercings increases as a function of the severity of all assessed types of abuse and neglect (emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; emotional and physical and neglect). The study further reflects regression analyses which included the covariates of age, gender, education, and income, and the sum of significant kinds of childhood abuse and neglect are positively related to having tattoos and/or piercings. The study concludes that body modifications could have special significance for individuals who have survived adversity, in particular, interpersonal trauma at the hands of caregivers. These findings could inform screening procedures and low-threshold access to psychotherapeutic care as means and mechanisms of aiding coping and healing.

Terms: Grief Trauma Tattoos Piercings Healing Coping Mechanisms

I. INTRODUCTION

Tattoos and piercings often serve as a “means of coping with previous adversity and are often (although non-exclusively) expressions of autonomy, attempted efforts to heal, to escape and to express revival, replenishment and restoration to normalcy and sustained stability to function in everyday life, work, family, relationships, decision making and one’s mere existence.

In the world of mental health, the quest for effective and efficient means to address internal psychological and emotional hurt, grief, and sorrow abounds. Numerous research efforts have sought historically to invade this space with a necessity to acquiesce and acquire some degree and element of hope, healing and help contextualized in the therapeutic endeavors of counseling and therapy. Although the journey to solid living in a shattered world is all too often very meandering, complex and complicated, albeit treacherously tinged ride with trauma flashbacks, tenuous arguments and debates as to what is appropriate, applicable and even necessary, one truth remains paramount: the need for help, healing and hope permeates the human soul of traumatized individuals.

One could argue that an interest, an effort and even an acquisition of a tattoo is more than meets the naked eye. It is on many levels, a deep seated free flowing fall into an emotional abyss often absent of complete surrender as well as concrete sanity.

For many, one’s life experiences of hate, hurt, abuse, devastation and trauma is indicative of a transformation....a transmutation in which the desired journey, process and outcome is hell bent on translating pain and trauma into symbols of restitution, reaffirmation and even reclamation, healing, and solidarity with other survivors.

Research in many ways has been intentionally intense and invigorating in exploring possible and yet probable links between experiencing trauma and getting subsequently inked or pierced. On one hand, it appears tattoos and piercings might be more common among

people who endured child abuse and neglect — serving as a “means of coping with previous adversity and be an expression of autonomy and victory amidst both social and personal alienation from one’s soul and psyche.

Interesting to note, a research study (Ernst,2022) occurred in which the researchers recruited more than 1,000 participants from Germany, aged between 14 to 44 years. 40% of the participants did, at the very least, have one tattoo or one piercing — among them, only 35% didn’t have a history of child abuse or neglect. But out of 25% of the total number of participants, who reported growing up with significant abuse or neglect, as many as 48% had either a tattoo or a piercing or both. The more severe the abuse or neglect they faced, the more tattoos or piercings the participants had, according to the researchers.

Equally important, the onslaught and reoccurrences of COVID 19 phases have contributed to several intense and intrinsic introspections as sources of “mass trauma” for people across cultures and cities and communities.

Archival data often suggest that both victims and survivors of abuse, grief, trauma and various assaults unapologetically and relentlessly turn to tattoos and/or piercings as sources of signals, strength and strategic brands that offer psychological, social and emotional as well as social acceptance, receptivity, respect, responses and reciprocal healing among those who bare such. There are on many fronts, a solidification of universal support and enrichment for power, protection and perseverance against adversity, alienation and awkwardness. Tattoos often serve as a pseudo-form of protective armor — shielding individuals and giving them the courage to navigate life independently. Tattoos and piercings often convey public and physical decorations as if such were a protective armor psychosocially and emotionally. Individuals feel empowered and not disenfranchised as they seek autonomy, acknowledge, appreciation and acceptance both internally and externally.

Therapeutically, one could deduce that upon experiencing physical pain, the brain releases endorphins, which are chemicals produced by the body to relieve pain. Such occurrences often eases one’s emotional distress too by working on the pain center in the brain that senses both psychological and physical discomfort. Many tattooers are often current or former self harmers. For many, tattooing gives physical pain and emotional release. Subsequently, scars apparently may emulate and emanate sustained sovereignty.

Equally important, physical pain is also intricately linked with a locus of control one feels over one’s body and by extension, even one’s life. Further intriguing is that unlike emotional or social pain, it’s possible to control physical pain and that the physical pain can and often does serve as a precipitating trigger or motivator to

effectuate psychological, emotional and spiritual change within one’s self and in regard to one’s social relationships, family, friendships and work. Selective choosing of one’s tattoo often is synonymous with controlling the degree of pain one often endures. This sense of control in a moment of helplessness and emotional turbulence makes it a coping mechanism — much like self-harm.

Tattoos often serve as means, methods and mechanism to reclaim lostness, emptiness, guilt, shame and learned helplessness as well as hopelessness. Tattoos often serve as more constructive ways of being progressive, productive and empowered versus self harm and self destructive behaviors and actions towards oneself and others(Subramanian, 2024)²

Essentially, the pain inflicted in the process of getting pierced or tattooed is more tangible than emotional distress. This course of behavior gives validation to victims and survivors of pain, abuse, trauma and grief as well as victimization. . Tattooing starts at the body’s first line of defense, the skin, and uses it as a canvas to physically bear witness to the assault experienced on body, mind, and sense of self. As a result, it often visually and viscerally becomes a source of healing (Phillips, 2021)³. Further, tattoos literally heal from the body out by using the skin to narrate healing in words and images. They often address the essential dilemma in trauma between hiding the unspeakable and proclaiming it.

In addition, several people in the U.S. population either are opposed or would never consider getting a tattoo, 2019 IPSO poll, 3 in 10 (30%) of Americans have at least one tattoo and 40% under the age of 35 have at least one tattoo (Jackson, 2019)⁴

While a plethora of reasons for tattoos exist as people choose to get them, a scarlet thread of concerning themes emerge across the spectrum. One consistent and congruent theme is the choice of a tattoo to register some aspect of dealing with a person’s past trauma. Secondly, across nations, generations, and wars, those in the military have used tattoos as symbols of allegiance, horrors faced, bravery, survival, and tributes to fallen comrades. It is also important to understand not all loss is traumatic, but all trauma involves loss. It may be the loss of loved ones, of life as it was known, of a sense of agency, safety, predictability, of hope that may be the driving force behind the acquisitions of tattoos and piercings.

Recovery from trauma may also involve both remembering and finding a place to deal with traumatic loss. Many find a place for unspeakable trauma and loss in tattoos. Whether it’s 9/11 in which first responders (albeit, civilians, EMT workers, firefighters, law enforcement, healthcare professionals, nurses, etc.) or the all too common experiences of police brutality. Many victims, survivors and identifiers have selected tattoos

and piercings as an indelible reminder of the terrorist assaults experienced, as well as the open public display of both the possession and profession of courage and the bonding among those who cherish the loss of so many.

One must remember that most traumatic events ultimately register within the body in terms of survival reflexes of fight, flight or freeze. To insult to injury or impact from those experiences, our memory records the indelible impact and implications as fragments encapsulated and expressed as visual images, bodily or physiological feelings, tactile sensations as well as diverse sensory reactions and reminders of the experienced trauma or incident.

In so many words, tattoos are the body's first line of defense via the skin and our bodies serve as display boards to bear witness to an assault experience on our body, mind and sense of self. Subsequently, they are often visually and viscerally become a source of healing. In her book *Under the Skin; A Psychoanalytic Study of Body Modification*, Alessandra Lemma (2010) reminds us that with tattooing, the significance for many is not just in the final creation but in the process of inking itself. For some, the process of the physical transformation, albeit painful, is like the birth of a new self-depicted in images or words. The tattoo is a visual demarcation of the new self from the old (Lemma, 2010)5.

And whether it's a person's near death experience or a cancer survivor's mastectomy, all serve as efforts to reclaim one's self some shape, form or fashion (psychologically, cognitive, spiritually, emotionally and/or physically).

Considerably, is it possible and even probable that the visibility of tattoos and piercings can also help undo any shame one may associate with having been a victim — by acknowledging that trauma publicly, and in a frame of their choosing? Nevertheless, there is a collective agency of therapeutic power of tattoos in which they either reflect, display or serve as a visual representation of a personal narrative" — offering "bodily reclamation and cathartic release." Such is both powerful, poignant and provocatively riveting to both the psyche and soul. The association between trauma and getting inked or pierced isn't just a cultural fact, though. There are fleeting indications and plausible suggestions that tattoos and piercing aid in mental health care, recovery and stability. In effect, tattoos and piercings could also provide an impetus for therapeutic conversations about the significance of past experiences and about currently important themes all of which are needed to perpetuate healing, hope and help. Equally relevant to both understand and recognize is the issue that the relationship of trauma with these body-altering activities, may not apply to individuals for whom tattoos and piercings have a cultural significance. Ear piercings (are

relatively common cultural rite of passage found in most countries and communities) among children and teens does not automatically correlate to childhood trauma. In this case one's culture trumps context.

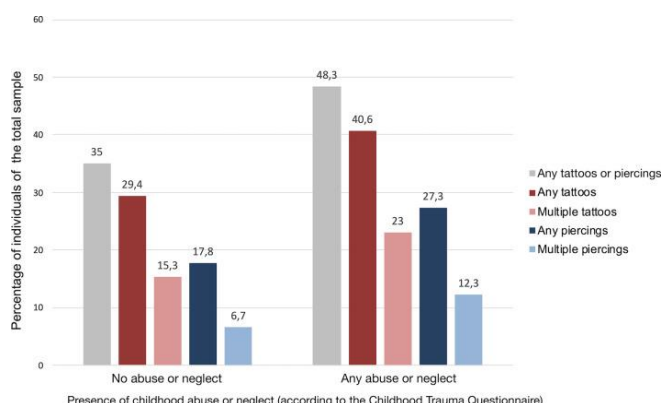


Fig. 1
Percentage of individuals with tattoos and piercings, stratified by reports of childhood abuse and neglect. Proportions of those with tattoos or piercings (or several tattoos or piercings, respectively), were greater among those who reported adverse childhood experiences. All presented differences between those without childhood adversity and those with reports of childhood adversity were statistically significant

Source:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9026588/>⁶

Equally important, in the journey and processing of tattoos and piercings as means and mechanisms of healing, it's important to understand such actions and efforts are by no means automatic nor an immediate panacea uniquely qualified to heal and provide hope. Further, there are serious and significant differences between tattoos and piercings. Both are body modifications that can be permanent or temporary, and both involve puncturing the skin to some degree. And it should be noted that tattoos are usually injected under the skin while piercings go through the skin. Tattoos are usually (but not always) permanent while piercings can be temporary.

3. The healing process for tattoos is longer than for piercings.

4. Tattoos require more aftercare than piercings.

5. The pain factor is different for tattoos vs. piercings - some people find tattoos more painful while others find piercings to be more painful.

6. The risks are different for tattoos vs. piercings - infection is more common with tattoos due to the needle going under the skin, while rejection is more common with piercings as the body can push out the jewelry over time.

7. The cost is different for tattoos vs. piercings - tattoos are typically more expensive as they take longer to complete, while simpler piercings can be done on a budget.

8. The placement is different for tattoos vs. piercings - with a tattoo, you can have it placed anywhere on your body, while with a piercing, the location will be limited by the type of piercing you choose.

9. The care is different for tattoos vs. piercings - you need to carefully clean and moisturize a tattoo to keep it looking its best, while Piercings need to be cleaned with saline solution or soap and water.

A. Different Types of Piercings

There are many types of piercings that go beyond just the standard earlobe piercing:

1) Cartilage piercing: This type of piercing goes through the hard tissue at the top of your ear (the cartilage). Popular examples include tragus, conch, and helix piercing.

2) Earlobe piercing: One of the most popular types of piercings, an earlobe piercing goes through – you guessed it – your earlobe! Earlobe pierced can be worn with studs, hoops, or dangly earrings.

3) Lip piercing: A lip piercing is any type of piercing that goes through your lips, including Monroe (or Madonna) piercing, labret, and medusa.

4) Oral piercing: An oral piercing is any type of Piercing that goes through your tongue, gum, or cheek. Common oral piercings include tongue webbing, Frenulum linguae, and smiley.

5) Nipple piercing: A nipple Piercing Is a type of Body Piercing that goes through...you guessed it...the nipple! Both men and women can get nipple pierced, although it is much more common among women.

6) Navel (or bellybutton) piercing: A navel piercing is a type of body piercing that goes through your navel. Despite what you may have heard, navel piercing do take quite some time to heal properly so make sure you give yourself plenty of time before showing off your Bikini bod!

7) Septum piercing: A septum piercing goes through the narrow cartilage in between your nostrils. Septum pierce sometimes wear “clickers” – circular barbells that have a small hinge on one side – which makes them easy to take in and out as opposed to a traditional septum ring.⁷

Tattoos

Tattoos are also pictures drawn on the skin through shallow injections of colored ink. Tattoo artists use tiny needles and a rapidly pulsating machine to deposit the ink just under the skin. Standards for hygiene in licensed tattoo studios are high, so the risk of infection from contaminated equipment is minimal. With "garage

artists," this is not always the case, meaning blood-borne infections like HIV, or hepatitis B or C can be spread this way.

The dyes in tattoo ink can be a problem for some people. While inks are safer than they used to be, a lack of regular oversight means that not all inks are hypoallergenic. Allergic reactions are rare, but not unheard of. Because they most often occur in reaction to any color in the red family, new tattoo clients may be counseled to begin using red in small amounts until they know how they'll react. Reactions can cause itching, blisters and bumps (called granulomas) around the edges of a tattoo.

A person with a new tattoo is usually counseled to cover it for a day, avoid submerging it in water for up to two weeks, and rub it frequently with ointment and then with unscented lotion to promote speedy healing. New tattoos involve compromised skin - an obvious contraindication for massage. After the initial tenderness subsides, many people experience intense itching for a few days. This is another caution for massage, which can make itching worse by drawing blood to an area. The safest course in this situation is to wait for any pain and itching to resolve before doing massage in an area with a new tattoo.

Piercings

Piercings are self-evident, and the variety of body parts that are pierced continues to expand. I remember being both shocked and vastly curious the first time we had a massage student with a nipple ring. (In my own defense, I will point out that these were the days when it was daring to have more than one hole in an earlobe.)

Piercings involve using a special needle to penetrate the skin. Various types of instruments are then inserted into the opening and secured from both sides. The piercing heals when scar tissue forms a tunnel around the instrument. The young woman Tamra described had several long instruments that were inserted to reach horizontally under her skin across the back of her neck.

Depending on the site, piercings can take anywhere from a few weeks to several months to heal completely. At that time, jewelry can be removed and replaced easily. (There's the answer to Tamra's question, by the way: She can take the studs out of her neck to receive massage, if necessary.) Most piercing jewelry is made of surgical steel. Surface piercings, like those on the young woman with the nape studs, have a relatively high rejection rate, but they tend to be most successful when the jewelry is made of surgical-grade Teflon or acrylic, which can conform to the body's curvature. While piercings are healing, the person is advised to keep the area clean and avoid letting anything like hair or clothing catch on the jewelry.

The size of the jewelry is an important safety factor. If it is too short, it can be drawn into the skin, and if it is too long, it can create unnecessary friction as it rubs on nearby structures. Tongue studs that are the wrong size are notorious, for instance, for causing damage to teeth and gums. Other risks with piercings include the possibility of excessive scar tissue or keloids, or trauma if the jewelry is torn out.

Guidelines for massage in the context of piercings are clear: New piercings involve injured skin and must be locally avoided until the lesion has scarred over. On the other hand, older piercings pose no contraindications, and the jewelry can be removed to make massage more effective whenever necessary.

Subsequently, many implications come to rise relative to the relationship between grief and trauma. Recent research has identified as many as a few distinct ways that getting a tattoo has helped individuals cope with trauma.

- Tattoos can function as physical manifestations of mental scars and encourage others to remember the event.
- Tattoos can also help trauma survivors maintain connections with other survivors and provide a sense of control over their body.

Most recently, wearing a tattoo has become increasingly mainstream and viewed as a mode of self-expression. Tattoos are basically considered in general no longer the province of deviants or criminals. Added to such perspective is that numerous people get tattoos for a variety of reasons, including self-enhancement, asserting individuality or group membership, representing resistance, and challenging gender norms and displaying rebellion against the status quo.

What is both known and noted consistently via research and to the naked landscape of America is that for many getting a tattoo appears to help some survivors cope with trauma, and give focused meaning to their experiences:

Exposing hidden mental scars to gain public recognition. Some survivors felt that their trauma left invisible wounds, and thus they felt that they had to “prove” to others that it existed at all. Also, witnessing the trauma so it will not be forgotten is important. To individuals who desire to share their traumatic experience with others often go hand in hand with the expectation that society at large commemorate the traumatic event. Thus, the tattoo at once memorialized the trauma for the person bearing it, reminded others of the event, and signaled to others what the survivor had endured. Another profound insight to the curious relationship between grief and trauma is that maintaining intimate connections in the encounter with others has significant impact and impetus. Exhibiting a

tattoo also helps survivors make deeper connections and give meaning when interacting with others. Even the symbolic meanings of tattoo images after trauma are relevant. Survivors who have experienced trauma related to a mass event often choose specific tattoo imagery that bare collective meaning. Tattoos and piercings can spark psycho-spiritual transformation and help regain control of one's body. A central experience of trauma is feeling the loss of control. Thus, the decision to get a tattoo can itself be a reclamation, in which the survivor takes back control over physical or emotional injury⁸.

To these ends, the curious relationship between grief and trauma remains paramount in terms of means and mechanisms of coping for people in their lives.

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