

# Medical Trauma

Real Medicine Blog



## What is it?

Medical trauma is the emotional and psychological distress caused by negative experiences within the healthcare system. It isn't just about a single bad experience—it often builds over time through repeated instances of feeling dismissed, unheard, or even harmed by medical professionals.

## How does it Manifest?

Many patients who experience medical trauma are labeled as “non-compliant” or “refusing care.” But often, their reluctance comes from past encounters where they were ignored, belittled, or traumatized. Parents and caregivers of medically complex patients are especially vulnerable to this type of trauma. When they constantly have to fight for the care their loved ones need, it creates a deep emotional burden that can impact how they interact with the system in the future.

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## How Medical Trauma Happens

Even with the best intentions, medical trauma is created in subtle ways:

- **Being Dismissed:** Patients are told their symptoms are “all in their head” or that their concerns aren’t serious.\*
- **Rushed Care:** Short appointments and lack of eye contact make patients feel like they are just a number.\*
- **Painful or Confusing Procedures:** Patients undergo treatments without enough explanation or emotional support.\*
- **Lack of Compassion:** When healthcare providers focus only on physical symptoms and ignore emotional well-being, patients can feel abandoned.

Over time, these experiences shape the way people approach healthcare. Some may delay or avoid medical care altogether, leading to worse health outcomes. Others might become defensive or anxious in medical settings, which can make future interactions difficult for both the patient and provider.



## How Can We Address this Personally and Professionally?

If you’ve experienced medical trauma, you are not alone. Healing starts with recognizing it and taking steps to regain a sense of control over your healthcare.

### For Patients & Caregivers:

- **Acknowledge Your Trauma:** Recognize that your feelings are valid and that your past experiences have shaped your reactions to healthcare.
- **Advocate for Yourself:** Take notes before appointments, bring someone you trust, and ask as many questions as you need.
- **Find the Right Provider:** Look for doctors who listen, validate your concerns, and involve you in decision-making.
- **Regulate Your Nervous System:** Deep breathing, mindfulness, and therapy can help you feel more in control during medical encounters.
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### What Healthcare Providers Can Do

As healthcare professionals, it’s essential to recognize how medical trauma affects patients. Small changes in approach can make a big difference in creating trust and preventing further harm.

### For Healthcare Workers:

- **Slow Down & Listen:** Giving patients time to express themselves fosters trust and prevents miscommunication.
- **Acknowledge Past Trauma:** If a patient is hesitant or emotional, recognize that they may have had difficult medical experiences before.
- **Explain & Educate:** Make sure patients fully understand procedures, risks, and their options. Informed patients feel more in control.
- **Validate Concerns:** Even if you don’t have all the answers, simply saying, “I hear you, and I understand this is hard,” can be incredibly powerful. (Blog post information and content copyright – Dr. J. Anderson)