

TRAUMA IN OUR TIME

Tony Bates | Brendan O'Connor Show | April 25, 2021

Why are we suddenly talking about Trauma so much? The word is everywhere. It's the new 'mindfulness'

Trauma gave voice to something in all of us that we had no language for. Severe trauma had been written as incurable brain disease. At a time when unhealed trauma accounted for many in our psychiatric institution, our national policy - "Planning for the Future (1984)" didn't mention the word once. "A Vision for Change (2006)" mentioned it three times. "Sharing the Vision (2020)" mention it 27 times, more than it refers to any other disorder treated in our mental health services.

What is trauma?

Our traumas are the wounds of life that shape us and form us. Trauma is our emotional response to intensely distressing events – natural disasters, rape, road traffic accident. These experiences are described as traumatic because nothing had prepared us for them; we can't take them in when they happen. We may try to deny they are happening, but our lives are never the same again.

Trauma can also result from experiences that are more subtle, but no less impactful. Growing up in a violent home, where the threat of something bad happening is always in the air; Loss or prolonged separation from someone or something that is critical to our lives; neglect; extended periods of isolation and loneliness. Any and all of these leave their mark.

Trauma refers to what we go through when we experience these very distressing events. We experience a high level of stress. When the stress level becomes too much, when we can neither fight it or escape from it, we become frozen.

Sometimes trauma makes us grow. Someone sees we are in pain; they stay with us; they are kind. They allow to feel what we feel. We share our story until it doesn't frighten us so much. Something happens that allows us take back control of our lives. We act. We learn some valuable lesson.

But sometimes we don't grow, because trauma becomes locked into the tissues of our body, and we become frozen in time. James Baldwin: "It can happen that people become stuck in history and history becomes stuck in them."

We try to block it out of our minds, we try to forget it but we can't. If we are reminded of what happened in any way, we don't remember what happened, we relive it. So we go to great lengths to keep unwanted memories out of our awareness. We may avoid people and places that remind us of what happened. We bury our pain, but we bury it alive.

Unhealed traumas are like homeless orphans who stand outside our houses looking in the window at our happy 'normal' lives and wishing they could be part of it. But we don't allow them in because we're afraid they'll mess everything up. We pull the curtains but they don't

go away. Sometimes they rattle the window frames in the night and we wake in sweat. And by day they tap on the glass and keep us on edge. No matter how normal but inside ourselves there is no peace.

Trauma can both unite us and separate us. We can recognise trauma in someone and feel an empathy with them, even if we don't know what exactly happened. We sense they've been through the wars. And they know by our tone of voice, the way we look at them, that we've also had our own darkness to deal with. Even though we're complete strangers, we can feel close.

Our wounds can also divide us and keep us apart. We hide from each other under cloaks of shame, or behinds the masks we wear. We feel ashamed or weak because we haven't been able to get over our pain and move on with our lives. Maybe we also feel responsible for what happened.

In our efforts to push away painful memories, we lose touch with ourselves. Healing trauma is about reclaiming a part of ourselves that's been disowned. Recovery is about inviting whatever has been broken to become part of your life, and bringing what has been broken in us together with courage, patience and a lot of love.

Perhaps the strangest thing about trauma is that as long as we don't face them, we keep repeating them. Our past becomes our destiny.

What is PTSD?

PTSD happens when trauma lives on in our bodies. People with PTSD have intense, distressing, thoughts and feelings long after the traumatic event has ended. They may relive

The event through flashbacks or nightmares; they may feel sadness, fear or anger, and they may feel very disconnected from themselves and other people. They may feel constantly on edge (Joe: "I've two nines dialed all the time). They avoid situations, events, people that remind them of the traumatic event and

While these symptoms might seem strange, we need to appreciate that each one is an attempt to protect a person from feeling, thinking about or reliving the overwhelming distress they felt at the time when some event or events happened to them

While I generally don't like labels, PTSD gave a voice to something that was ignored for years. We didn't understand it; we didn't have a language for it. It was viewed as an incurable brain disease; as an anxiety disorder; a major depressive disorder that had nothing to do with anything that happened in a person's life, but a result of some unrelated chemical imbalance. Given the depth of fear and mistrust that some PTSD survivors felt inside, their lack of friendliness was often misconstrued as an antisocial personality disorder. So recognition of trauma is major progress. At least we're more inclined to think twice about asking what's wrong with someone and instead asking "what happened to you?"

What is Vicarious or secondary Trauma?

The term **Vicarious trauma** was coined by Pearlman & Saakvitne (1995) to describe the profound shift in world view that occurs in helping professionals, working at the coal face of trauma. Many notice that their fundamental beliefs about the world are altered and possibly damaged by being repeatedly exposed to traumatic material. (E.G., An ICU nurse who is repeatedly exposed to distressing deaths loses faith in her capacity to save lives; A domestic violence shelter worker may stop being able to believe that any relationship can be healthy. A child abuse investigator may lose trust in anyone who approaches their child)

(Very relevant in the context of Covid)

Why do we repeat traumas if they were so upsetting to us?

This is a phenomenon that Freud called repetition compulsion

Freud: "a psychological phenomenon in which a person repeats an event or its circumstances over and over again, in an attempt to achieve mastery. This includes putting oneself in situations where the event is likely to happen again. This 're-living' can also take the form of dream in which memories and feelings of what happened are repeated".

Erikson:

"the individual unconsciously arranges for variations of an original theme which he has not learned either to overcome or to live with".

Pema Chodron: "Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know."

Perhaps, for some of us, these repeated feelings and patterns of behaviour become so familiar that we regard them as core to our identity. "The only 'me' I've ever known". So we keep going back to them, finding a certain security in what feels painful but reassuringly familiar. Rather than learn from our past we remain tied to it. Half living in a safe hell.

Why do we need to remember?

Because our suffering matters. What happened to us may have been wrong, left us feeling unsafe in the world and slow to trust others. But when we can acknowledge what happened, feel what we feel, whatever that is, and tell our story to each other, our suffering needn't shut us down, and turn us into cynics.

Our suffering matters. It always holds some truth. When I can face what happened to me, I can speak that truth with authority and maybe save some one the pain I have known.

What have we learned about treating trauma?

Trauma only surface when we're safe. (e.g. Covid) We need to find a place/relationship where I feel safe and can be with the sensations, images, feelings and thoughts, that arise . Touch can be a way to let someone know they are safe. We need to go slowly, to work with the body to release emotion

that has been lock in. Telling our story over and over can reinforce our sense of being a victim, of being helpless' it can also be a way of avoiding feeling our feeling. To heal, you've got to feel.

My rational brain has **no connection** with my emotional brain therefore it is not possible to talk myself out of feeling bad. Telling the story about an event, often not the best way to release lock down.

It is a question of **befriending my bodily sensations rather than pushing them away - coax myself to** learn to observe and tolerate what I am feeling NOW. Opening and closing my hands yesterday evening has a soothing effect. Sit with the sensations and respond to the movements they prompt.

We need to invoke the adult to care for the wounded child. This was Freud's great realisation in his last paper. Psychotherapy has to work to open what has been shut away, at the same time as strengthening the adult to take care of the 'wounded child". That child needs someone to take him / her home and look after them. Psychotherapy has to work very skillfully to break down defences while at the same to build up and empower a responsible adult.

It is necessary to develop/cultivate a sense of agency - to enable a client to do things that give them back a feeling of control. When you are traumatised you feel powerless, helpless, defenseless. Healing means being enabled to move from being a victim to becoming an empowered survivor.

Summary:

- *Our wounds shape us and form us*
- *Trauma lives in our bodies, emotions, and minds*
- *We can only acknowledge our pain when we feel safe*
- *Our traumas are like unwanted orphans who stand outside and gaze in the windows of our 'normal' lives*
- *When we reclaim our hurt selves, we feel pain, but we also feel more alive*
- *Recovery brings us closer to ourselves and closer to each other.*

Two recommended books

Derek Scally - Best Catholics in the World

We're hearing a lot about trauma these days. We've been shocked in particular by one example after another of institutional abuse at the hands of religious. We've felt disturbed, enraged and a sense of shame for what happened. It certainly has shattered our relationship with the institution of the Catholic church. How do we come to terms with what has been revealed and the impact these atrocities have had on our lives as bystanders. Even if we are not directly responsible for what we are hearing, do we have a responsibility to understand what the way we were and learn what it was in this country that allowed these things to happen? In addition to meeting our obligations to survivors, what are we to do with our rage, and guilt and shame that recent revelations have stirred up a great many of us? What can psychology bring to this conversation?

A Whole Life, by Robert Seethaler (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016)

A beautiful story told in a short novel that brings us right through a man's life from birth to death. Andreas Egger is a quiet and simple man, born somewhere around 1898 and living out most of his life in a small village located in a valley in the mountains. Egger has no clear memory of his parents; he is raised by a cruel distant 'uncle' who allows him access to little formal education. But he is strong and healthy, finds no manual labour beneath him, experiences a great love later in his life. Given his years as a Russian prisoner of war, and in general leads what most would find to be a severe, difficult life, we might assume this novel is grim. But this is not by any means a depressing novel. The reader is quickly caught up in the way Egger deals with the unkind blows he receives. We see that in spite of harsh conditions, Egger lives his life without self-pity, and one that is as fulfilling as any we might wish for ourselves. We are inspired by this character and ultimately he makes us reflect on how we deal with adversity in our own lives.