



Dealing With Trauma

Emotional trauma is any experience that overwhelms our psyche and is beyond the scope of psychic comprehension



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A patient once shared that she was lately feeling short of breath and was having flashbacks of losing her mother to illness from decades ago, when she herself was only a little girl. The onslaught of painful memory was debilitating. Through our conversation it emerged that this patient was now nearing the age that her mother had lived to, was feeling terrified of illness and death herself, and was reliving her loss. An old trauma had been stirred.

Emotional trauma is any experience that overwhelms our psyche and is beyond the scope of psychic comprehension, as this loss must have been for my patient as a young girl. It may or may not coincide with overt threat to our physical being. Such an experience often brings with it pain, distress, strain, and is psychologically and physically demanding of us and our relationships. It may be experienced in an acute way over a few days, or it may feel chronic, continuing for years. Whichever form of trauma we may live, it is inevitably a difficult experience to bear.

Trauma of an emotional kind emerges from a range of circumstances. Sometimes, a singular, large event, may be experienced as traumatic. Relatively more personal situations such as the loss of a loved one or a relationship, sexual and other kinds of abuse, violence, illness, and so forth, can be traumatizing. Further, various social and political situations such as forced migration, war and civil conflict, surviving natural disasters, and other large-scale community and environmental crises, lived and intergenerational, can feel traumatic.

While sometimes trauma may emerge from a singular event, other times it may form the long-term context of one's life. Continuous experiences over a long period of time of emotional neglect or violence in significant relationships, dynamics of control, humiliation and manipulation between persons, both within families and outside, especially in the early and formative years of our lives can be particularly traumatic, setting us up with a shaky psychic apparatus. Additionally, lifelong experiences of deprivation and poverty, suffering as consequence of caste, class and religion, prolonged difficulties in work life, our complex gender and sexual identity, among others are likely to gather within us and feel cumulatively traumatic.

We generally respond to traumatic experiences in the best way we are able to based on our psychological and other resources. Our initial responses are usually focused on first basically surviving a difficult period and coping with the immediacy of the distress. These responses may take the form of emotional detachment, withdrawal from relationships, dependence on a range of substances, changes in food habits such as bingeing

or withholding of food, excessively controlling aspects of our lives, engaging in risky behaviour, and so forth. We may continue to cope in this manner for short or very long periods.

In the long run, such coping begins to lose its function of protecting us, and shifts to creating frustration, lack of fulfilment and emptiness, limiting our lives and connections. Dealing more fully with emotional trauma asks for us to bear with and find a way to create room in our psyche for whatever is emerging, painful as it may be. This psychic space can enable an inner conversation that helps us to listen to and carry better our emotional experiences, to find expression and articulation, and through that for difficult experiences to transform, change and mature into something digestible.

Our emotional life stagnates when we are unable to create such an inner conversation. It is then that we find ourselves in patterns, often unhappy and unfulfilling, that we continue to repeat endlessly, akin to being frozen in a traumatic moment over time. Listening to our emotional life may be cultivated through a range of creative endeavours depending on our inclinations, such as playing an instrument, writing and reading, engaging in various forms of arts and culture, playing a sport, nurturing a craft such as pottery, gardening, dance, and various other activities that become meaningful paths of expression and resonance. Such engagements are often soothing, cathartic and bring a sense of inner stillness. The use of our physical bodies in such activities helps us begin to feel rooted within ourselves, and through that reach closer to our inner experience. While many times our traumatic experiences can be attended to through such activities and relationships, there are circumstances when this is not possible to do by ourselves. In these situations, we need an other, what a patient of mine recently referred to in jest as a “mental health partner”. Our needs may be severe, requiring a concerted engagement, and then psychotherapy may become crucial and necessary. Psychotherapy of a psychoanalytic nature, which is the approach that I practice, enables listening to our inner emotional life and traumas through the listening that the therapist offers us. In the therapeutic relationship, a trusting atmosphere of curiosity about oneself is fostered, within which we can begin to confront and tolerate the terrors in our lives, many times for the first time.

Creating inner room and engaging with our traumas allows for reactions and immediate coping with situations to transform through reflection into meaningful experiences. Whichever route we may take to engage with our inner emotional lives, it is only through recognizing and relating with this that we can begin to tend to our psychological wounds and traumas. This can be a potential route to healing, a step toward living a more fulfilling, true and free life.

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