

Revolutions in Understanding Mind and Brain on Trauma

Trauma, whether it is the result of something done to you or something you yourself have done, almost always makes it difficult to engage in intimate relationships. After you have experienced something so unspeakable, how do you learn to trust yourself or anyone else again? Or, conversely, how can you surrender to an intimate relationship after you have been brutally violated?

It takes enormous trust and courage to allow oneself to remember. One of the hardest things for traumatized people is to confront their shame about the way they behaved during a traumatic episode, whether it is objectively warranted (as in the commission of atrocities) or not (as in the case of a child who tries to placate her abuser.) It is hard enough to face the suffering that has been inflicted by others, but deep down many traumatized people are even more haunted by the shame they feel about what they themselves did or did not do under the circumstances. In victims of child abuse, there is agonizing shame about the actions they took to survive and maintain a connection with the person who abused them. This was particularly true if the abuser was someone close to the child, someone the child depended on, as is so often the case. The result can be confusion about whether one was a victim or a willing participant, which in turn leads to bewilderment about the difference between love and terror; pain and pleasure.

People describe feeling emotionally distant from everybody else. Momentary rages and shame are all that breaks through the disconnected lacking of any sense of purpose or direction. Often they try to stay busy, working, drinking, drugging –doing anything to avoid confronting old demons. They have nightmares and flashbacks. And alternate between occasional bouts of explosive rage and long periods of being emotionally shut down. Often, there is great difficulty getting along with other people and maintaining meaningful relationships.

War is not the only calamity that leaves human lives in ruins. For every soldier who serves in a war zone abroad, there are ten children who are endangered in their own homes. This is particularly tragic, since it is very difficult for growing children to recover when the source of terror and pain is not enemy combatants but their own caretakers. We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present.

Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think. We have discovered that helping victims of trauma find the words to describe what has happened to them is profoundly meaningful but usually it isn't enough. The act of telling the story doesn't necessarily alter the automatic physical and hormonal responses of bodies that remain hypervigilant, prepared to be assaulted or violated at any time. For real change to take place, the body needs to learn that the danger has passed and to live in the reality of the present.

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