

What is [mental] Trauma?

What makes an event (or series of events) mentally traumatic? What is the effect on the person that makes this a trauma, instead of just another event?

We use the term *trauma* to refer to events and the effects of those events on persons when the effect is some sort of harm. For the purposes of this essay, I am going to focus only on mental trauma. It is quite common for mental trauma to co-occur with a physical trauma and certainly physical events are mentally traumatic, but I am not an expert in addressing issues of physical trauma so I will limit myself to the mental intra-psychic realm.

Trauma is a disruption of normal functioning that has lasting effects on the capacity of the person to function optimally. For that reason it may help to begin by looking at some aspects of normal functioning.

All events have both an interior and an exterior. What appears to us from the inside may be very different from what shows up on the outside. When we go inside to the interior of our experience we find a rich and varied world that has all of the complexity and wonder of the exterior world. We have far more social support for attending to matters in the exterior world of shared experience so we are likely to be less familiar with the interior domains of our consciousness.

There are many different ways that we can categorize the complexity of our interior experience. Deepak Chopra, for instance, lays out a typology of ten domains of consciousness. For my purposes in the development of Creative Conflict Resolution I suggest just four: sensations, emotions, thoughts, and wishes. Every event in our experience will resonate with us in ways that give us sensations, arouse emotions, provoke thoughts, and stimulate desires or wishes.

Let's focus for just a moment on the arena of our thoughts: that is, the cognitive domain. In this aspect of our awareness we develop an internal model or map of the world around us. We ascribe meaning to particular experiences. By this mechanism I am able to know that the particular ringing sound I am hearing is my phone and that someone is calling me. I know to turn on the phone so that I can speak to the person calling me.

If my map is accurate then I can fashion a relationship to the world around me that is accurate, meaningful, and satisfying. But my experience of the world continues to change. That is because the world changes. Even if I try to keep everything the same, the fall lineup of TV shows still changes. I have to adapt to the world around me. I have to update my map.

From time to time I may find that clinging to my old map is more satisfying for intra-psychic reasons than it would be to update it. I know that my expectations are not being met, but I may still cling to what I think *should be* the way things are. We call this attachment to a faulty map a *cognitive distortion*.

At its simplest, trauma is an experience that we can't make sense of. It is a perception of the world that I find I cannot fit into my map in a way that allows me to better navigate the territory of my life experience. As a consequence I am likely to build a faulty map. And I will tend to cling to the map even though I know it doesn't really fit. Thus cognitive distortions are both the cause and the consequence of trauma. Let's illustrate this.

Frank was eight years old the summer that he broke his collar-bone. Actually, it was his teammate, John, who swung the bat, but Frank was standing too close to John as he was warming up for his turn at the plate. Frank was out for the season.

Frank's dad was an avid fisherman and Frank longed to go fishing with him. When they were on the way home from the hospital with Frank's arm in the sling, Dad said, "S'pose you can fish with one arm? How about you and me going fishing together on Saturday?"

Frank was ecstatic. He could hardly wait for Saturday. But when he woke up Saturday morning the house was quiet. His dad had already left to go fishing...without him.

When Dad got home that afternoon Frank felt invisible. He tried to figure out why Dad hadn't taken him. Dad didn't seem to notice him; in fact, he gave no indication that he even remembered that they were going to go together.

A couple of weeks later Frank was able to screw up his courage and ask his dad if he could go fishing with him sometime. He didn't mention his disappointment; he just expressed the wish to go. Dad said, "Sure buddy, I'm going with Joe this week but maybe next weekend."

So Frank counted the days to the following Saturday. When he awoke he could already tell that he had been left again. It was light out and he knew Dad wanted to be on the water when the sun came up. He cried. He felt ashamed of crying but he couldn't stop it. He just couldn't figure out why.

Then he remembered what happened the previous Thursday evening. He and Dad were at the store and Frank saw a toy that he really wanted. He had seen it on TV and it was really cool. He got very excited and started pleading with his dad to get it for him. But Dad got very angry and said, "Quit your whining! You sound like a little girl."

Frank was stunned and ashamed. And now on Saturday morning he realized that of course his dad doesn't want to go fishing with a little girl. He only goes fishing with big men.

Frank is now 45 and in a middle management position in a mid-sized company and his career is going nowhere. He just doesn't feel like he fits in but he can't figure out why. He remembers the summer when he couldn't play ball because of the broken collar-bone but he doesn't remember his disappointment about not going fishing with Dad. He just knows that he isn't going to complain about his life because he doesn't want to whine like a little girl.

The physical trauma of the broken bone has long ago healed. Now it is just the source for a good story from his childhood. But the mental trauma from not being able to go fishing is something that he hardly recognizes, much less has worked through. Nevertheless it has left him with a cognitive map that says that he doesn't really fit into the world of men and that he must never say what he wants or complain that things aren't the way he wants them to be in his relationships with men. This, of course, doesn't stop him from complaining to his wife.

The trauma of not going fishing with Dad has a far greater and more lasting effect than the trauma of the broken collar-bone and the loss of the baseball season. He knows what happened to his collar-bone. But he can't figure out what happened in his relationship with Dad.

I have intentionally selected here an example of a relatively small "t" trauma. But I don't see a clear line between small "t" and large "T" Traumas. The difference is simply a matter of degree.

What are the variables that make one susceptible to having an event be registered as a trauma? Why do two people experiencing the same event register different degrees of trauma from it?

Now let us suppose that Frank has a brother, Fred, who is just a year older. Fred has the same father and the same likelihood that he is going to go along on the next fishing trip. But Fred hates to go fishing. He thinks it is boring. He will not experience being left behind as traumatic but rather as a relief. He is being treated the same but what it means to him is dramatically different because of what he brings to it.

Let me add here that just because someone is less traumatized doesn't necessarily mean that they are more emotionally or mentally healthy. Some events are intrinsically confusing and horrific. Failing to register them as such may just mean that someone is out of touch. Anyone who was not in some sense traumatized by the events of September 11, 2001 wasn't paying attention.

What can one do to anticipate events that might be traumatic and prepare for them in a manner that will reduce the traumatic impact of those events?

I just this morning dropped my daughter at the airport on her way to school in San Francisco. She is really excited about many aspects of this coming quarter

but she is anxious about sharing an apartment with three other grad students. She has never had an experience of living with random others when she was not traumatized by their lack of commitment to shared cleanliness. She just knows that they are going to be failing to do their share of the cleaning. She isn't OCD, but she has standards.

We talked about her concerns and she was able to get pretty specific about what she is afraid may happen. She expects they will be able to set up an agreement; she just doesn't expect that it will be kept. So I suggested that a part of the agreement be what they will do when any of them feels as though the agreement isn't being met. How do they each want to be informed when others see them as failing to keep to their agreement?

Being able to anticipate what is likely to happen and having a plan for addressing it will help to alleviate the traumatic effects. If, for example, I am informed that my dad has cancer and only has a few weeks to live, I can anticipate that this will be very difficult for me and the rest of the family, not to mention to Dad. I will want to be able to talk to him about his feelings and my feelings but I know that he will not be willing to go there with me. My ability to make adequate meaning from his illness and death is going to be hindered by his unwillingness to have that conversation with me.

So is there someone else that I can talk to? Who am I closest to in the family? Do I need to schedule some time with my therapist? What resources can I have in place to help me process whatever comes up for me?

What is involved in healing from trauma and is there a point at which someone can be said to have fully healed? If so, does that mean that those persons are now "as if the trauma had never occurred"?

I certainly believe that it is possible to have fully healed but I don't see healing as the same as being in a state as though the traumatic event had never happened. Indeed, I don't want to move to a way of being that denies or obliterates my experience. Trauma is a teacher, at least potentially. If I have healed from the trauma, then I have resolved what didn't make sense to me and now it does make sense. Now I have a meaning for what happened and is happening and I can use that map to negotiate the world in which I live. As they say, "Scar tissue is very strong."

So what might it mean for the hypothetical Frank to heal from the trauma of not going fishing with his dad?

Suppose that Frank and his wife, Marie, present for marital therapy. They are not getting along because Frank is so critical all of the time. Nothing Marie does seems to be adequate.

As we explore the roots of Frank's criticism of Marie we discover that he is actually more critical of what is going on at work. We find that there is a part of Frank that is very justly concerned about some problems in the workplace about which he finds he can't speak up. He has a part that sees when things aren't right and wants a voice, but there is another part of him that stifles that voice when in relationships at work- that is, in relationships with men.

He has no such reservations with Marie. In fact, much of what spills out with Marie is left over from what he can't say at work.

When we explore what is in the way of speaking up at work and find that there is a part of him that believes that if he is a complainer at work he is a "whining little girl" and he will not be accepted in the world of men. He finds the eight year old part of him that cried that morning when dad didn't take him fishing and we help him sit with that boy and hear the feelings and recognize that the failure here wasn't with Frank but with a dad who didn't understand how important this was to Frank.

We can see that Dad may have just thought that Frank was like Fred and the reason Frank was left behind was not that he was too insistent about what he wanted but that he didn't let Dad know clearly what it was he wanted. We can help Frank find the part of him that is trying to secure his place in the world of men by keeping his mouth shut and help that part see that speaking up might be a better way to meet that goal. We can help the little boy unburden and Marie can come to see Frank with new appreciation for what he struggles with. Frank can feel Marie's support and be grateful to her for standing by him even when he has been such a shit to her.

But there will be times at work when he notices that he is afraid to speak up. And there will be times at home when he is critical of Marie and they will both wonder if his criticism isn't about something else. These flags will help them remember to look at what is going on and to try to see past the surface. It will help them to see if there is a meaning under the meaning.

They will always have and be able to get support from the resolution that they fashioned as they addressed and resolved the trauma of Frank being left behind. We don't ever finish dealing with an issue. We just get better at seeing it and more creative and proactive about addressing it.

So healing the trauma is about discovering what it is that doesn't make sense and making sense of it, and then using the new discovery as a tool for addressing the new challenges that life presents. Every day presents small traumas. There are always things happening that we can't make sense of. And as we learn how to make sense of them, we revise and refine the cognitive map which we use to guide our choices so that we are more likely to create what we need.

What is Trauma?

Large “T” Traumas are only different by degree. They do more damage. They are harder to address. They are more imbedded in our identity and are thus harder to affect change around. As we resolve them we get more benefit and discover more strength from them. They never go away. We come to a place where we do not want to forget the trauma but rather to remember it as a sign and source of our resilience and creativity.

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