

# **Overcoming the Effects of Trauma**

## **An Experience Beyond Words**

### **Splitting Your Self**

The theory of trauma suggests that when events are more than our brains can process, we do something called, “splitting”. We compartmentalise or “split” ourselves into different parts. For example, we may have a “good” self and a “bad” self. We can then deny or disown the “bad” self (behaviour and activity). Our survival of trauma then depends on our ability to disown a part of ourselves and our lives.

### **Strange, Unexplained and Destructive Behaviour**

Consequentially, this denial can channel traumatic memory into emotions, flashbacks, and physiological reactions, without us being aware of the specific memory causing these reactions. Symptoms include; hypervigilance, panic attack, a sense of hopelessness, shame, guilt, eating disorders, addictions, self-harming, and suicidal thoughts. These destructive behaviours bring short-term relief but risk safety. Some people want to punish themselves because of the disgust, shame or guilt their hidden “bad” self feels.

Traumatized people can seem ‘normal’ but parts of them are very unstable, for example, acting anxious or angry, acting unsafely or destructively or at other times, depressed and suicidal, whilst functioning normally at work.

## **Wonky Wiring**

Research has also identified that there are neural pathways in the brain which 'fire' together and give rise to certain traits and behaviours. For example, as a result of a feeling of insecurity in the family whilst growing up, a child may have learnt to associate insecurity with love and may have wired the neural pathways together. The effect of this may then be, that the adult searches for insecure relationships because that is when/how they feel loved.

## **Using the past to make sense of the present**

Trauma reactions are communications from parts of ourselves that we have denied, so the fear, shame, and guilt we feel, may *seem* current but actually be signals from the past. Therapists can help a person connect current emotional triggers, to a child part from the past making it easier to resolve them as old threats and not present danger.

## **Talking Survival**

Self-awareness is the key. Talking about trauma in a general way can help us feel heard and recognised. It's not useful to focus on the intense detail of the trauma as this re-traumatises us but rather on how we survived. The safer we feel, the more we will be able to grow our ability to accept and integrate both the past and the present. Having our trauma witnessed and believed is empowering and healing.

## **Making Sense**

Brain scan research has shown that trauma has the impact of causing shock experiences without words to explain. So, we are left with how we felt when we experienced the trauma without being clear about what actually happened to us. During the trauma, many of us have an 'out of body' experience, mentally and physically 'travelling' to our "happy (safe) place". Therapists try and give those who have been traumatised a process to make sense of what happened, to reconnect us to our strengths and build resilience.

## **Embracing All Parts of Our Self**

It is useful for a therapist to ask a person if they can recognise different parts of themselves, for example, an angry part or a frightened part, etc. The therapist can then explain how each part sees the world. The more we accept and integrate and embrace these parts, the healthier our internal emotional environment. The more a person denies a part of their self, the more it will knock at the window of their mind.

This can be done by being aware of the past but staying in the present. How you feel or felt and what you think or thought hold useful information, but it is all just data not truth or self. When your beliefs can be separated from feelings, you can start to change your story.

Healing can begin, once our adult self provides the safety and opportunity to be present and then to interact with the child parts of our self and to listen to what the child needs. Once this happens, internal reconciliation can begin between the parts and acceptance of the 'the bad me' can take place and be integrated into the self. A new story may begin, where the individual can begin post-traumatic growth and add value to meaning in life.

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