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The journey between what you once were and who you are becoming is where the dance of life really takes place.

– Barbara DeAngelis

LIFE AFTER TRAUMA

We have experienced a number of significant traumas in recent history: the tsunami in Indonesia; the Oklahoma City bombing; September 11; the deaths of soldiers and civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan; the Virginia Tech shooting. Hearing about and viewing the devastation and often graphic details of these large-scale traumas may have affected our lives significantly.

But trauma comes in smaller packages as well and can be extremely difficult to handle. A traumatic event is defined as one in which:

- A person experiences, sees or learns about a situation that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threats of physical harm to oneself or others.
- The person's response involves intense helplessness, fear or horror.

For example, a person may experience trauma if they are:

- Physically attacked as in cases of domestic abuse or rape.
- Hurt by a hurricane, tornado or flood.
- Injured in an automobile accident.
- Involved in combat.
- A witness to someone's death.
- Threatened by a mugger or carjacker.

After experiencing a traumatic event most people go through a period of adjustment and then return to feeling and living as they did before the event. Some, however, develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a medically-defined condition where the stress of the event causes chemical reactions in the brain as well as physical symptoms.

It is important to understand that most people who go through a traumatic event do not develop PTSD. The people who suffer from PTSD need to know that it is a real medical condition. It is not "all in your head" or "just your imagination," nor is it a sign of personal weakness.

To be diagnosed with PTSD, a person's symptoms must:

- Occur after experiencing, seeing or hearing about a traumatic event and
- Last for more than one month and
- Cause severe problems and distress in the personal life, work life or other important areas of daily living.

Symptoms of PTSD fall into three groups – re-experiencing, avoidance and hyperarousal. They may start to appear within weeks of the event or they may not show up for months or years after the traumatic event. Sometimes people have other medical conditions such as clinical depression or anxiety disorders along with PTSD. People with PTSD may try to numb their feelings by "self-medicating" with alcohol or drugs.

Re-experiencing symptoms

- Frequent, sudden and upsetting memories about the event
- Repeated distressing dreams about the event
- Flashbacks - feeling or acting like the event were happening again
- Strong mental or emotional pain when reminded of the event
- Physical reactions, such as shakiness, chills and a racing heartbeat, when reminded of the event

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LIFE AFTER TRAUMA

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Avoidance or Numbing Symptoms

- Trying to avoid thoughts, feelings or conversations about the event
- Making efforts to avoid activities, places, or people who remind the person about the event
- Not remembering important details about the event
- Not enjoying activities that were once enjoyed
- Feeling detached or removed from family and friends
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Believing that important life goals (marriage, parenthood or aging) may not occur

Hyperarousal Symptoms

- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Angry outbursts, irritability
- Problems concentrating
- Being startled easily

Talking about the trauma that led to PTSD may not be easy. People may feel that the trauma was too painful or too personal, and they may be too embarrassed to share. But to get help and to heal, it is important to describe the traumatic event to a doctor or mental health professional.

PTSD can be treated with medicine, psychotherapy or a combination, and most people respond well to treatment. As with any serious medical condition, it can take time to start feeling better. If you or a loved one have the symptoms of PTSD, call a doctor to talk about it. Help is available.

PROFILE

Stephen Muse, Ph.D.

Stephen is the director of the Pastoral Institute's Pastoral Counselor Training Program and is co-director of the D.A. and Elizabeth Turner Ministry Resource Center. He is a published author with numerous articles in professional journals and chapters in seven books. Stephen specializes in Christian formation and faith-based psychotherapy, special problems of clergy and helping professionals, intimate relationships and treatment of PTSD.



His Thoughts: One thing you can do when you deal with a trauma that has occurred in your life is to talk about it with someone who loves you. And secondly, speak so that your body confirms the truth of your words. There is no healing without feeling and basically, it is the fear of feeling and ultimately of shame and rejection by the families and community we love, that makes us afraid to risk the journey back to wholeness.

The key is to recognize that it is a normal response to an abnormal situation. In order to avoid being overwhelmed, the nervous system essentially anesthetizes a person. There is an African proverb that captures this well: "When you injure a child, the spirit moves outside them." The longer one had to face trauma, the greater will be the dismemberment and the longer it will take for healing.

The key to healing from the dismemberment of trauma is to re-member. Do it with someone who loves you and will go with you into the darkest places you most fear and ashamed of, without turning away or judging you.

Journey is a monthly publication of the Business Resource Center of the Pastoral Institute. It is our hope that you will find something in its pages that will help you on your life's journey. The Employee Assistance Program provided by your business or organization makes counseling services available for you and your family. To make an appointment in Columbus, call 706-649-6500; in Lanett, AL call 334-644-1172; other locations, call 800-649-6446 for a referral in your area. Counseling is confidential.