



Recovering from painful experiences

Personal Matters

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Margaret, who was assaulted on the street three years ago, experiences a pounding heart and shortness of breath whenever she has to leave home. Jerry, an Iraq war veteran, still wakes up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night convinced that someone is sneaking up on him as he sleeps. Third-grader Katie doesn't want to go to school or to bed since surviving a car accident in which her brother died. Joan, who grew up in a verbally violent household, has problems trusting anyone and so has few close relationships.

These four people suffer from debilitating post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD is a specific kind of anxiety disorder experienced by individuals who are the victims of or witness to some horrifying event, or who have experienced long-term trauma in a severely dysfunctional family. Specifically, combat, murder in a family, assault, rape, physical accidents, verbal and emotional abuse, sexual and physical abuse, and natural disasters are just some of the experiences that can cause post-traumatic stress.

Traumatic events, either mild or severe, can be emotionally damaging in varying degrees and are sometimes life threatening. In extreme circumstances, one's survival may be at risk and the body's "fight or flight" response goes into high gear. Sometimes, however, because these kinds of experiences can be so intensely physically or emotionally dangerous and out of control, in an abduction for example, one can neither fight or flee. In order to cope with this kind of overwhelming situation, people distance themselves mentally and emotionally. They unconsciously push away any feelings (panic, terror) that won't help them to survive in the moment because the situation is too overwhelming to the psyche. They retreat into a numb, almost trance-like, highly focused state, in which time slows down and the unfolding events seem to be the only reality in the universe.

This is called emotional dissociation and helps get us through the crisis moments, but ultimately, if unprocessed, it can cause psychological wounding and traumatization because it prevents us from assimilating the experience, that is, fully acknowledging, not denying, the terrible events and fully examining the resultant fears and feelings.

When we do not assimilate trauma, we can not fully recover from the events and post trauma stress occurs. When that happens, two seemingly opposite reactions occur: avoidance and flashbacks. We push away our memories and feelings about a trauma in an attempt to put it behind us. But our unconscious mind will not forget. Memories of the event and/or memories of the feelings around the event force their way into everyday life.

These unconscious memories can trigger a reaction if there is anything in the environment that is reminiscent of the trauma. Simple acts such as sleeping in the dark, leaving the house or getting into a car

become reminders of the traumatic event and can trigger upsetting physical, mental and emotional symptoms such as guilt, self-hatred, depression and nightmares, and panic responses: perspiring and heart palpitations.

The good news here is that, despite the severity of such symptoms, treatment is available and people can and do recover from PTSD. Each individual needs to find the right treatment approach and program designed for the specific traumatic event they experienced. Treatment may include role-playing, hypnosis and desensitization techniques. Some find an eventual transition into group therapy and support group membership helpful. With caring treatment, support of family and friends, people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder can heal the emotional wounds of a painful past or experience and look forward to a positive, healthy future.

Located in Rockport, relationship coach, Susan Britt, M.Ed., a former psychotherapist, helps couples, families, individuals and co-workers turn conflict into compassion. Questions and comments may be addressed to her at light622@juno.com

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