

New Understanding Of Trauma Offers Healing Relief

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What's Inside:

Introduction: What is Trauma.....	1
What We've Learned from Animals	1
Resources: The Power to Move Through Distress.....	2
What may traumatize	2
Sensations: The Language of the Healing Response	3
Letting the Body Know It Survived.....	4
Conclusion	4
Reading and Listening Resources.....	4

Introduction: What is Trauma

You are walking alone on a mountain trail at dusk, returning to your car a little later than you'd planned. You've always known it's bear and cougar country, but you've never had a bad experience with a wild animal, so you're not concerned. Suddenly, you hear a loud snap of a twig behind you. Your heart rate increases; eyesight and hearing become more acute; your head whips around towards the sound, and your skeletal muscles tighten as blood flow to them increases. Without conscious thought, you instantly assess the possible threat and choose to flee or fight. You may have picked up a stone or limb as a weapon or begun to run before you even think.

Reading this you may have noticed increased heart and respiration rate, a tingling of the skin, increased perspiration, and a sense of alertness. Your imagination just now may have offered images of escape routes or ways you could fight off the imagined attack.

Highly stressful or life-threatening experiences arouse vast amounts of survival energy and emotion—the well-known fight-or-flight response, shared with all animals. Our lower or reptilian brain and sympathetic nervous system arouses instantly to maximize our chance of survival. Merely thinking

about such a situation activates the same responses. When it takes control, our bodies respond far more rapidly than normally to assess the danger and to flee or fight.

But there is a difference between such responses in modern humans and animals. *After* the danger has passed, animals quickly return to normal, whereas humans are sometimes traumatized. The person may seem to recover after the experience, but if they were unable to avoid the danger and didn't have support to shake off the strong charge of sensations and emotions, that vast amount of survival energy can become stuck in their nervous systems. Weeks, months, or years later, often without even a conscious connection to the traumatic experience, symptoms may appear, possibly including:

- Restlessness, obsessive thinking, or anxiety
- Depression, drowsiness, or low energy
- Reactivity with fear, guilt, or anger
- Panic/anxiety attacks
- Relationship and intimacy difficulties
- Pains or disease with no apparent cause
- Addictions

These symptoms are normal for a person with an over-stressed nervous system. They have lost *resiliency*, the natural ability to flow easily between the many moods and energy states necessary to live a full and rich life (see diagram page 3).

What We've Learned from Animals

As a student of animal behavior, Peter A. Levine, Ph.D, observed a fascinating detail. He watched many species of animals experiencing possible threats, such as a nearby twig snapping, or real threats, such as a predator's chase. After the threat had passed, the animal would often twitch, shake, or run around vigorously. It might engage in playful fighting or chasing with others of its kind. His observations revealed that, far from random, these behaviors served to discharge the huge reserve of survival

energy that had been aroused by the threat. Once this was released, the animal soon returned to normal behavior as if nothing had ever happened. Were it not for this ability to rapidly discharge excess survival energy, Levine concluded, the animal's ability to meet future threats would be reduced and they would not long survive in the wild.

What can we learn from this to help humans heal from traumatic experience?

The symptoms of trauma are primarily a physiological and an energetic problem, rather than a psychological one. Though the circumstances one has suffered are real, distressing, and often tragic, the trauma resides not in the past, but in the highly aroused state of the nervous system—*today*. Levine observed that a metaphor describing traumatized humans would be simultaneously depressing both the brake and the accelerator pedals on your car. It would not take long for “symptoms” to appear, such as a damaged engine or transmission.

Fortunately, the natural discharge response we observe in animals is still very much a part of our human makeup. It resides in our lower brains, the same area which allows us fast and effective survival responses to danger. Our higher brains frequently inhibit this innate healing response through thinking, judgment, inhibitions, and cultural conditioning to please those around us. But we can recover this natural response relatively easily. The nervous system, stuck in the highly aroused state, can be discharged. Most people then get significant relief quickly. And with more time, distressing emotions dissolve and are replaced with a growing sense of optimism, energy, and clear thinking to meet life's pleasures and challenges.

This understanding has led to powerfully effective healing modalities, **Somatic Experiencing®** and **Somatic Trauma Resolution®**, which help people recover their natural ability to release that energy.

Resources: The Power to Move through Distress

Five year old Anya comes running and sobbing in from the backyard. Her Mother holds her. For a while she is inconsolable and beyond words. Then, between cycles of crying, she tells how her friend Annie grabbed her favorite doll. When Anya tried to get it back, Annie pushed her down hard. Telling

the story brings back the strong feelings again. Her body shakes and her legs kick in anger. She sobs deeply again for a few breaths, then cuddles into her Mother's lap. After each cycle of feeling, she is calmer. Her Mother listens, comforts, and holds Anya. A short time later, Anya loses interest in the incident and is happy to say “yes” when her Mom asks if she'd like to help fix dinner.

Anya's Mother “resourced” her by helping her to feel safe and accepted. Anya felt her Mother's warmth against her own body and the pleasure of her Mother's calming voice. This allowed Anya's innate healing response to move through her body and complete. Her anger, sense of betrayal, and fear were discharged with shaking, kicking, and tears. This is

What May Traumatize

Trauma is not a type of experience. It is the effect of a threatening experience on a person's physiology and nervous system. This depends, in part, on how severe the threat was felt to be, whether the individual was able to take any defensive action, and whether they had support afterwards to move through the powerful sensations and emotions. As you review this list, try to be aware of any sensations or discomfort which may be triggered by the reading.

*Events which may lead to trauma include:

- Inescapable attack, including rape, animal attack, war, physical abuse, incest, and molestation
- Physical injury, including wounds, surgery, amputation, burns, poison, and prolonged hospitalization
- Forceful impact, such as falls, auto accidents, other high impact accidents, and head injuries
- Emotional trauma during development, such as severe neglect and abandonment, or ongoing verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse
- Severe illness or emotional loss
- Natural disasters such as fires and earthquakes
- Horror, including seeing an accident or witnessing violence
- Massive overstimulation such as near-drowning, suffocation, electric shock, hallucinogens
- Pre- and peri-natal distress, birth-related trauma

not likely to be an incident which Anya carries into a troubled adulthood.

But what if her Mother had been impatient, blaming, shaming, or had tried to convince Anya that she shouldn't feel that way? With no safe place to feel those powerful feelings and sensations, Anya's nervous system might have had to freeze or numb to some degree to avoid overstressing the body with prolonged, unrelieved high emotion. If this were a repeated pattern, Anya would likely have been traumatized and she might as an adult have some of the symptoms described above.

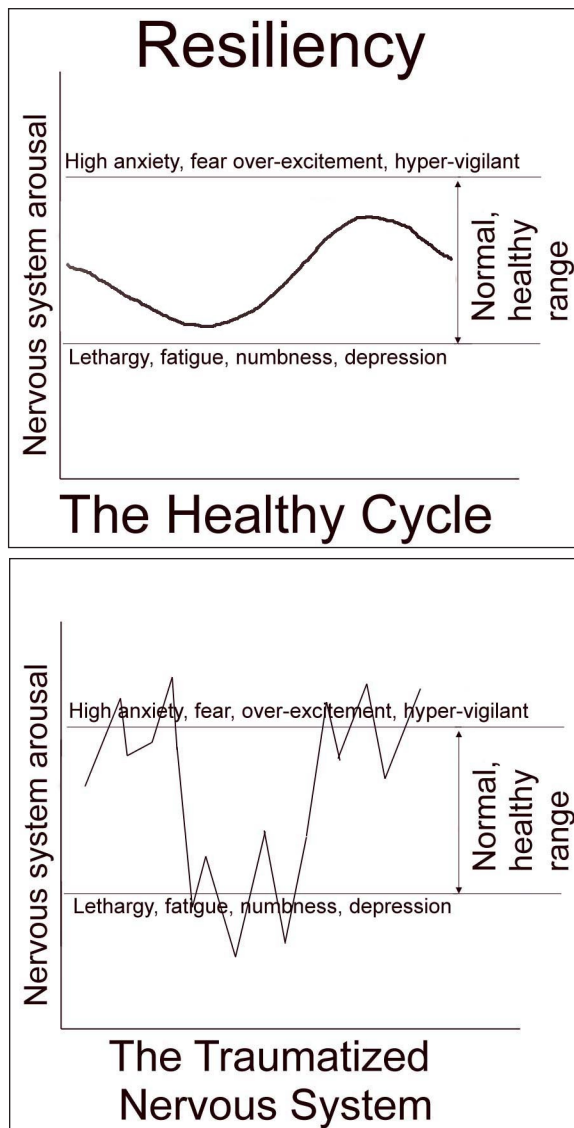
Sensations: The Language of the Healing Response

Staying present to sensations comes naturally to animals. Without a "higher brain" devoted to thinking, language, and cultural learning, animals live in a world of sensations which warn them of danger and, once danger is past, lead them automatically to discharge survival energy. Our higher, logical, thinking brains are valuable and powerful, but if we want to release the stuck arousal energy of trauma, we need to come back into our bodies and our sensations.

Take a moment to think of something you do that you enjoy, are good at, and that makes you feel empowered. Notice the sensations in your body as you think of that. Slow down, because this kind of experiencing moves on a different time scale from our minds. Notice how it feels at the level of sensation in your body. See if any physical areas feel energized, pleasant, warm, or open. Take all the time you need to be curious, as if you were watching quietly, waiting for a rabbit to emerge from a hole. As you "watch" your sensations, see if you can notice what emerges next. Then continue to be curious to notice what happens after that. The language of sensations is the language of the lower brain. This is the part of our being from which our instincts arise, and a part which knows how to heal ourselves.

If you have experienced unresolved trauma, this exercise may have been difficult. You might have had difficulty focusing on pleasant memories and their associated sensations. You might have been drawn instead to distracting thoughts, impatience, uncomfortable memories, or to areas of the body which felt constricted or painful.

Be assured that this is normal. It is normal because



the majority of people in our culture have suffered trauma which has left its mark on their nervous systems. The reason that our systems tuned out sensations and feelings was that those sensations and feelings were anxiety-producing, overwhelming, unpleasant, or scary. As you attempt to re-connect with your innate healing response, you may initially re-experience those distressing feelings and think it isn't working for you. It can sometimes be very difficult to find purely positive sensations and feelings.

But in spite of the challenges, staying present to our sensations is one of the fastest paths to healing. It will usually lead to movement of energy and a shifting or diminishing of either physical or emotional pain within minutes. But, though the principles are simple, they are not always easy to practice and can often be too challenging to do alone. Consider getting the help of a skilled professional and using some of the resources listed at the end of this article.

Letting the Body Know It Survived

During the last second before the other car runs the red light, you see it out of the corner of your eye. You start to glance to the right and begin moving your foot to the brake, but before you can complete either, the impact slams into your car and body.

Later in the hospital, your Doctor assures you that your injuries are not severe, but months later you still have a stiff neck, are easily fatigued, and have anxiety when driving.

In our modern world, car accidents are one of the most common causes of trauma. After such an accident, EMT's and hospital personnel can do wonders to save lives, but are not trained to help the patient avoid the effects of trauma. Our cultural tendency is to try to put a good face on it and move beyond thoughts of the accident as quickly as possible. Indeed, without good resourcing in the body, as described above, there can be so much anxiety associated with the memories that it can be upsetting to dwell on them. Add to this the fast pace of the emergency environment and our desire not to upset our loved ones with our own emotions. Our natural healing response is often thwarted. While your higher brain may have heard the Doctor say "you'll soon be fine", your lower, instinctual brain and physiology has not yet gotten the "all-clear" signal. It needs the time and safety to fully feel and respond from the innate healing response, similar to that of the animals described earlier. You may need to sob, tremble, or twitch; feel rage at the other driver, reasonably or not; feel how frightening it was; and grieve what was lost. Your neck and head may need to complete the turn towards the oncoming car. Your foot may need to complete the interrupted braking action which, given an extra second, could have avoided the collision.

With appropriate support and resourcing, this slowing down to fully experience the body and its reaction to what happened will rapidly move survivors of car accidents and other trauma into discharging the anxiety permanently, which, in turn, can be a huge aid to physical healing.

Conclusion

The great news is...it is never too late to have a happy childhood, or to recover from trauma. Regardless when or what happened, you can build resources today from pleasant images, empowering

memories, safe places, and the felt sensations which these thoughts and images bring to your body. Once these resources are solidly experienced, there is safety at last, and the body automatically brings forth what it is ready to process, in the perfect order to heal.

Remember—all the animals know how to do this, and many thousands of people have successfully remembered. You can too!

Reading and Listening Resources

- *Waking the Tiger—Healing Trauma* Book by Dr. Peter A. Levine, Ph.D.
- *Healing Trauma—Restoring the Wisdom of the Body* Six cassettes by Dr. Peter A. Levine, Ph.D.
- *Trauma Healing—A Pioneering Program for Restoring the Wisdom of Your Body* Book & Integrated CD Learning by Dr. Peter A. Levine, Ph.D.
- *It Won't Hurt Forever—Guiding Your Child Through Trauma* Two cassette tapes & guide by Dr. Peter A. Levine, Ph.D.
- *Sexual Healing—Transforming the Sacred Wound* Two CD's by Dr. Peter A. Levine, Ph.D.
- *Crash Course—A Self-Healing Guide To Auto Accident Trauma & Recovery* Book by Dr.'s Larry & Diane Heller
- www.releasingtrauma.com
- www.traumahealing.com
- www.healthwaveinstitute.com

For more information, contact:



RELEASING TRAUMA
Reclaiming full aliveness as your birthright

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