



Article by Dr. Mary Ann Wallace, MD, MA

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

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“The hardest part was feeling trapped.” Nicole was speaking in short, choppy breaths, her face contorted in a grimace, hands clenched and pushing away from her as if the original perpetrator were right there, pressing down on her yet again. It was clear that the reenactment of the scene was just as real in her telling it to me as it had been three years prior when it had actually happened. Now, in the serene sanctity of my office, she was daring to make public the deepest secrets she had held nested against her heart ever since that time.

Unlike most events that come and go in our lives, leaving but traces of memory, those experiences that we feel most meaningfully etch themselves deeply in the matrix of our neuronal network, where they can be replayed again and again, as if “for real”. This includes pleasant as well as traumatic events. This latter category has, in recent years, become recognized in its phenomenological experience as “post traumatic stress disorder”, or PTSD.

We carry these memories as living legacies – burned like DVDs in our minds and bodies in such a way that the filter thus created influences all we see thereafter. The slightest stimulus that reminds us of this former event pulls the reenactment out of the library to replay as surely as if it were inevitable in our lives. Unfortunately, sometimes it does play itself out again and again to varying degrees, based on the choices we make through the hazy film of this muddied perceptual filter. This explains the reenactment of abusive situations for domestic violence victims, for example.

Anyone can suffer from PTSD. It doesn’t require exposure to battle conditions to feel deeply wounded by the onslaught of life’s barbs. Typically, a PTSD victim has experienced some deep denigration of integral worth that has touched close enough to her or his core to carry the sting of continual threat to survival. Different situations may inflict that wound for different individuals. Regardless of the initiating event, we develop a worldview that is designed to a) explain the pain in such a way that we can have control over it; b) avoid exposing ourselves to any similar situation again.

When we keep getting the proof we need from the outside world that our fears are valid, it becomes increasingly difficult to convince ourselves that there may be another way. This is, however, the leap of faith we must make to begin to unravel the skein that binds us.

As Nicole and I continued to work through the months, we uncovered the layers. First, the fear. Ever present and choking, easily stimulated by the smallest reminder – a man in the alley, a tone of voice. The worst culprit was Nicole's own mind, manufacturing story upon story to support the tenets of her fear. She could feel the man in the alley approaching her – attacking her – even as he walked on by. Our work at this level involved a fair amount of cognitive reframing as well as desensitizing using imagery and suggestion. I taught Nicole a mindfulness based meditation practice that helped her in her roughest times when she was alone with her busy mind.

After this came the anger. In surges of violent rage, Nicole imagined all she would like to do to get even – get back at this evil man who had taken her dignity, stolen her pride and altered her life so completely. She, more than anything, wanted him to suffer the way he had made her suffer. Here, our work revolved around bringing her awareness ever more intimately into the core sinews of herself, so she could see how her anger was tearing herself apart. When Nicole realized that the anger, itself, was keeping her bound to this man who had violated her, her motivation skyrocketed to work it through – break this thread with him. We worked diligently together to honor the fact she was having the experience, to reframe the anger as that powerful energy which could help her break out of the victim role – she had to realize how very strong she felt when energized thus. She wrote a letter – never intended to send – in which she expressed every single thing she wanted him to know. Got it off her chest; and in rereading it, saw what lay within her. To her surprise, she saw how she, too, could be violent and filled with rage. Suddenly, there was a turning point. In defining a place of some equality on the basis of shared humanity, Nicole became ripe to begin the process of genuine forgiveness. This she did with meditations designed to facilitate that process. It was a slow process.

Finally, the grief. This phase actually began in tandem with the release of rage – the intense sadness and wrenching cries of grief at what had been lost. Her life as she had known it, her job, her circle of friends, she had even felt the need to move out of the community where the event had occurred. Ultimately, what she had lost was the innocence of believing herself to be safe in the world. By staying present with the tears and grief, consoling the child within with kindness, and letting the rage be reformatted and recognized as the capacity for strength and self protection, Nicole gradually transformed this tremendous grief into a place of soft heart. She began to speak of helping others who had gone through such pain. She painted pictures of herself going through the process – huge and graphic images displaying the enormous internal pain and agony. Thoughts of making a mural – with the story told for others to benefit from began to weave into our therapy sessions.

Gradually, Nicole became again a vibrant woman, easily given to laughter. The sparkle in her eyes was girded by a strength and wisdom gained only by having gone through the fire of tough experience. Her life had irrevocably changed – but now it was for the better. She had grown from maiden to experienced warrior through the work she had done. This sort of journey takes enormous courage. Every facet feels like it may tear one apart – it is truly ripping apart and reformatting the very essence of life as we know it. To not do the work of repair, though, is to live within the constraints of the PTSD

straitjacket. Confined by fear, restrained lest our rage get the better of us, we choke off the very life force, itself, if we consign ourselves that life.

Working through the layers is often a long process. Each person goes through the healing differently, at her/his own pace. Usually the facets of the PTSD wound are convoluted and so reappear in different forms as one does the self review. Shame is a sinewy, stubborn glue that can keep a person stuck until it, too, is revealed and released. (Self) love is the antidote; forgiveness the cure – but are hard-won and can only be truly achieved at the cellular level. Platitudes using such words only aggravate.

Mindbody therapy provides the sort of tool that makes it possible to break free. The courage required, though, comes from within the person of the traumatized individual. Healing the wound of PTSD requires an inner focus and awareness that is unique in its intensity. I use the word “wound” advisedly, for I would never presume to think of the imprint left by trauma as a scar. It remains too easily reopened by too many opportune stimuli to ever really completely heal, unless attended to with consciousness.

The good news is it CAN be healed, however, with the conscious awareness provided by deep mindbody work. A variety of techniques fall in this category: cognitive behavioral therapy, interactive imagery, Hakomi work, to name a few. Usually, effective PTSD therapy requires a combination of techniques, held together in the forged crucible of a trusting relationship with a skilled therapist. In this way, the reenactment of the perpetrated scene can come through to resolution, finally freeing the spirit and the energy of the victim of the abuse. Then, the wound is transformed into vibrant wisdom

In this way, PTSD might be seen as a unique spiritual discipline. Framing it thus certainly helps take the sting out of the work. Though just knowing that freedom from the pain of the smoldering wound of PTSD is possible is a compelling enough reason to start the hard work of healing.

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