

Thriving

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Helping Youth Overcome Trauma

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In writing about traumatization, one might think of a scene in the Cecil B. DeMille film, *The Ten Commandments*. We are about to witness the last plague to assault the Egyptians, the plague of death, which is depicted as a rolling, murky fog. At midnight the ominous vapor descends from the heavens, seeping into the cracks and crevices of doorways, windows, and chimneys, leaving in its silent wake the screams and shrieks of families who awaken to the loss of their first-born children.

Like the Egyptians of that era, many of today's children and youth are also being devastated by a rolling spirit of death—the trauma of physical, sexual, and spiritual abuse. My therapeutic approach has evolved over nearly twenty years of working with young people as they have faced the pain of trauma. This has led to the following conclusions:

1. Trauma recovery involves transcending spiritual woundedness.
2. Trauma recovery involves having the courage to face and acknowledge the truth.
3. Trauma recovery is marked by the courage to trust again.

A Captive and Discouraged Spirit

The effects of trauma can roll on unchecked like a spirit of death. In its path are strewn its once vibrant victims. Human bonds are rent asunder by the disgrace of trauma. These are the youngsters who have been verbally bashed, physically battered, sexually assaulted, and spiritually exploited. Other traumas of childhood neglect include: a) being left to care for oneself and handle the complexities of living; b) being dependent on adults who are unable to offer support or encouragement due to their own perpetual crises; and c) being confused over knowing who is responsible for what or who is in charge of dealing with problems. Secure human attachments cannot be built when lives are in chaotic disarray.

Youth who live in virtual war zones extend emotional antennae, build behavioral shelters, and dig mental trenches to protect themselves. This often means disowning parts of themselves that have been or are under attack. They struggle to cope and survive within the narrow parameters of rigid roles and rituals. Under these conditions, they are like roses who fail to thrive and never blossom. I believe failure to thrive is evidence of a spirit held captive. Soon, like the rose, the spirit withers and is doomed to create, express, choose, or transcend in a crooked fashion.

Healing requires shedding layers of protective clothing contaminated by the stench of the murky fog. The human heart begins to beat as the soul is freed to create, express, choose, and transcend in ways that are helpful, useful, and less symptomatic. Consequently, there is a gentle recognition of self and of a higher being able to restore meaning to life.

The Courage to Acknowledge the Truth

Trauma has a way of stealing a kid's voice. You can distinguish the oppressor from the oppressed by identifying who has the freedom to speak without restraint. The oppressed who have the audacity to speak often become scapegoats. This is not confined to individuals and families where there is trauma but can occur economically, racially, sexually, and politically. The ultimate price for speaking against the system is emotional or physical exile, which is psychological death. Consequently, the majority of exiles remain quiet.

All behavior will make sense if its context is understood. But this can only occur if we can speak the truth freely. I use the expression “practice of acknowledgment” because it captures the truth-finding quality. We must acknowledge what was done to us and how we and others reacted. This creates a backdrop where bruised realities can be curiously explored and reexamined.

If trauma goes unacknowledged, it traps its victims who are destined to repeat that affliction. It is not just that the pain is carried across the years and generations; the bigger disgrace is that the pain gets delivered, carried, and passed on secretly. Once inside, it burrows beneath the realms of inspection, contemplation, and evaluation. The practice of acknowledgment allows for the redistribution of disgrace, shame, fear, anger, and love. We are all capable of being perpetrators or victims of abuse, but being able to acknowledge that I wounded you or was wounded humanizes us all.

The Courage to Trust Again

Those of us subjected to trauma develop a fortified distrust of people, yet yearn for human contact. Often, our hope to be heard, accepted, and loved is dashed by despair. The legacy of disgrace we carry leaves us self-appointed impostors. For what appears an eternity, we go about life hiding, hoping to never be found out. Therefore, we avoid relationships because they are simply too risky.

Recovery seems to facilitate our reaffiliation with others. What occurs is a “coming out” of sorts. There is a fabric woven of shared experiences that forms the warm, safe, and strong blanket we call the recovery encounter. For the first time, some of us confess what transpired and release the secret(s) that held us prisoner for ages. Our response is often a softly spoken “you too?!” We get immediate feedback that gives meaning to our traumatic experience. While our shortcomings and weaknesses are revealed, our strengths and competencies are also validated. As we are touched, heard, and respected, our need for suspiciousness diminishes and trust is revived.

Trust revived creates the freedom to explore. We can now cooperatively and curiously investigate our personal histories and become able to see others as they are or were—just people. Community emerges as we are able to affirm each other as human, fully capable of both failure and success, with potential as well as limits.

For the first time we can examine the impact past and present events have had on our lives. In the spirit of real cooperation, the contamination which results from trauma can be scrutinized. Under the microscope of graceful inquiry, the ghost of death can be exorcised.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I described an ugly scene which ends with massive losses. But there were survivors. The Israelites did survive and move on to stake their claim in the Promised Land. Today, there are also survivors and it is my belief that we can go on to claim the Promised Land. Recovery is a process that evolves. As part and partner in the process, I have been changed. Captive spirits are healed by being able to acknowledge the truth and trust again. I am sure you have beheld this too, but as I continue to witness the miracle of youth becoming whole, I am compelled to testify!

This article, written by Dr. J.C. Chambers, first appeared in Reclaiming Children and Youth, 14(1) and is used with permission. J.C. was the founder of Stronghold Counseling in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He was a leader in our Reclaiming Youth Network. He is remembered and missed by many.



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