

HELPING PEOPLE RECOVER FROM TRAUMA

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And Crisis Intervention Strategies by James & Gilliland

If people haven't properly processed through a trauma, it will effect them long term. This resource is for people who have experienced trauma more than six months ago and the trauma is still bothering them. This resource attempts to understand these things, their impact in the present, and how to overcome them.

I. Signs that someone is still suffering from the trauma. The following are some signs that a person *may* be still suffering from the trauma.

- They are experiencing nightmares or reoccurring images in their mind of the trauma.
- They are numb to life. That is, they are detached and avoid people and activities which they used to enjoy. They don't care about life.
- They feel anxious, fearful, depressed, or angry and they aren't sure why.
- They have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.
- They have difficulty concentrating or performing their job.
- They have headaches.
- They may deny the impact of the trauma on themselves. They avoid talking about the incident. They cannot recall important details about the trauma.
- They may feel guilty or sadness.
- They are detached from people.
- They have no long range plans. They can't imagine themselves getting married, having a career, etc.

II. Suggestions to heal from trauma

A. Understand Flashbacks

The mind is like a video camera. When we experience a trauma, the mind records what happened, the sights, sounds, and smells. When a trauma happens, the memory becomes frozen.

Imagine someone who is running and suddenly they are frozen. In the same way your memory is frozen on the traumatic event. A flashback is an image in your mind of the traumatic event. It's as if the event is happening again and you experience all the horror and fear of the actual event.

A flashback is the memory trying to unfreeze the event. Just as that runner needs to thaw so he can keep running, our memory needs to thaw so we can move on from the traumatic event.

We cannot resist the flashback, but when it happens, we shouldn't be terrified by it. We should allow the memory to play and re play in our minds. Initially when we have a flashback, we experience strong feelings of fear, panic and anxiety like we experienced at the time of the trauma. Over time as the flashback replays in our minds, the feelings

diminish.

B. Don't deny the event

People who have experienced trauma are often so overwhelmed by the experience that they deny that the event happened or they deny the impact of the event on themselves. They can shut down emotionally, that is become numb to life.

To heal from trauma we cannot deny the event or its effect. We must acknowledge the hurt, confusion, fear, panic, helplessness and other emotions.

With the help of someone else, it is beneficial to relive the traumatic event; that is, to replay the event in your mind. It is helpful to recall exactly what happened and to identify all the emotions.

A person who has gone through trauma needs help from another person to process the event. This person can help interpret the event.

C. Learn to relax

A person still experiencing trauma has difficulty relaxing. It is important for them to learn to relax their muscles, take deep breaths, and fill their minds with peaceful images.

D. Finish unfinished business

Many times the events in the trauma happened so fast that the person who experienced the trauma feels guilty or ashamed by what he did or didn't do or by what he said or didn't say. For example, if someone died, you might feel guilty for not doing more to save him. You might feel shame for running away instead of helping rescue someone.

It is very common for someone who has experienced trauma to feel guilty, ashamed, regrets, anger, etc. They wish they could go back and say or do something differently. Of course, we can't go back to the event, but we can help the person work through their guilt and shame.

As the facilitator, role play the event with the person. The person is himself and you are the person he wants to talk to. As much as possible, you respond as you think the person would have responded.

The following is a **role play**. Achmad and Hasan were riding on a ferry together. The ferry started to sink. Achmad grabbed a life jacket and jumped overboard leaving Hasan behind. Hasan died. Achmad is having flashbacks of the event and is feeling guilt that he survived and Hasan didn't. He also feels shame that he didn't help Hasan.

You will play Hasan's role. Achmad will play himself.

Achmad: When the water started flowing into the ferry, I got so scared.

Hasan: That was awful. I was so scared too.

Achmad: All I could think of was to get a life jacket and jump off the boat.

Hasan: That's what I was trying to do to.

Achmad: As soon as I got that life jacket, I jumped. I didn't look back to see if you got one to. I'm so ashamed that all I did was think of myself.

Hasan: I was trying to find a life jacket too. I would have jumped just like you did if I had one. Don't feel ashamed.

Achmad: I feel so guilty that I was saved and you weren't.

Hasan: I know. I understand. You did what everyone else was trying to do. Don't blame yourself.

Achmad: Now that you are dead, I really miss you. I wish you were still with me.

Hasan: I miss you too. You were the best friend to me. We will always keep our memories of each other, okay?

This technique can help the person overcome feelings of anger, guilt, regret, shame, and be able to forgive himself.

E. Coping mechanisms

After a person has experienced trauma, they must cope with what they experienced. Their world has changed by what they experienced. Whereas before, their world was safe, secure, and predictable. Now, their world is unsafe, insecure, and unpredictable. They adapt to their world, but sometimes the way they adapt is unhealthy. For example, if a young woman was raped, she may be overly protective of her daughter. She may take and pick up her daughter from school and forbid her daughter to ever leave the house

without her. This is an understandable reaction to what the mother went through as a child; however, this over protection is unhealthy for her daughter.

As a facilitator, your job is to help this mother learn how to protect her daughter, but also give her daughter some freedom.

There may be many other kinds of behaviors which a person does to protect himself against the possibility of more trauma. Some of these ways may be healthy; others may not be. As a facilitator, you need to help the person understand why he is behaving as he is and what would be a healthy response.

F. Opportunity for growth

Trauma is an opportunity to grow as a person and to grow spiritually. God never wastes the pain.

The person needs to seek to understand how God wants to use the trauma in their lives and to build His kingdom.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-6.

We want to help the person to not see themselves as a victim. Yes, they have suffered a horrible experience, but in Christ, there is always hope. We are more than conquerors in Christ (Romans 8:37).

Ask,

- What have you learned about yourself as a result of this experience?
- What have you learned about God as a result of this experience?
- How are you a better person as a result of this experience?
- What new ministries might God be opening up as a result of this experience?

In a small group, review the above two sections on trauma, then discuss the following.

- 1) What trauma have you experienced?
- 2) How is that trauma still affecting you?
- 3) How will this study help you overcome the symptoms of trauma?