

Navigating a turbulent sea

For people living with unresolved trauma, nowhere is safe, yet specialists have a growing raft of techniques available that can help patients navigate back to a sheltered harbour.

WORDS / SONIA ZADRO

"Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o'er wrought heart and bids it break."

~ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Jenny's heart pounded, her hands shook and her breathing became shallow. An image of her uncle flashed through her mind; his piercing blue eyes and hands that were reaching over to cover her mouth. She heard a voice — a faint voice.

"Jenny, are you OK?"

Her uncle's hand was on her mouth.

"Jenny. It's Sylvie. You're here with me in the bank."

The voice was getting clearer.

"Jenny, look at me. You're safe.

It's Sylvie."

Jenny felt something brush her hand and jumped. She began to register Sylvie, her lifelong friend, standing next to her, her face full of kindness and concern.

"It's OK," said Sylvie. "Breathe."

Jenny glanced down and saw Sylvie's hand holding hers. She took a deep breath and her heart began to slow its thumping rhythm. Looking around, she saw a line of people behind her, staring. Before her was the bank teller with a frown on his face; his piercing blue eyes seemed worried. It wasn't her uncle. It just looked like him. Embarrassed, Jenny turned to her friend.

"I have to leave."

Thankfully, Sylvie knew her past and understood. Sylvie was one of the few people she ever left the house with.

LIVING IN FEAR

Imagine there was no place in the world where you felt safe. Everywhere you

went you felt vulnerable, sometimes terrified. This is what it's like for people with unresolved trauma, like Jenny. Here, Jenny was experiencing a flashback to her childhood abuse before she was treated for her post-traumatic stress disorder.

PTSD can result from any kind of situation in which a person feels terrified and/or emotionally overwhelmed. Abuse, war, car accidents, natural disasters are some experiences that can result in PTSD.

In the above example, 52-year-old Jenny had experienced years of childhood physical and sexual abuse. She didn't recall much of it until, at age 51, she had a car accident which left her feeling helpless — the same feelings

the memory effectively your nervous system to understand though is that to process entails, and it works. What's important The answer is yes. This what therapy then help alleviate their symptoms? could processing the memory properly experience wasn't processed correctly, symptoms developed because an experiencing be helped? If these this constant state of fear and re-

HELPFUL THERAPY

So how can people who live in their nervous system can relax and they can talk about their experience with people who support them, they can process their experience effectively. The brain is able to stay online and the fight-or-flight instinct settles down, as its energy has been released.

Usually when you process experiences in your daily life, all of the brain is functioning normally and your nervous systems can manage the intensity of emotions thrown at you. During a traumatic event, however, parts of the brain shut down.

Imagine you're walking across a road and a truck comes towards you. It's no good being relaxed in this situation. You need a system in your body to go. "Bam! Get off the road!" This is what the fight-or-flight system does. The body releases adrenaline into the bloodstream; this tells the brain to make you breathe faster and the heart to beat faster, sending lots of needed oxygen to your arms and legs to run or fight the danger. When fight-or-flight is activated, anything not critical to survival in that moment, such as digestion and immunity, is suppressed. For people with PTSD, the fight-and-flight system is switched on during the trauma and never properly switched off. They are left in a constant state of hyperarousal. A leading brain researcher of PTSD, Dutch psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, talks about what prevents the development of PTSD in traumatised people. If a person is allowed to express their fight-or-flight instinct and then return to a safe environment in which

protect yourself or run — is in overdrive. flight system — the impulse to either. As well as all this, the fight-or-throughout the body. has got stuck in the nervous system as a memory in the hippocampus. It's adequately understood and stored away even make it to the frontal cortex to be events of the traumatic experience don't the memory is often disjointed. The working, the sensory information from smell and touch — and, when it stops from your senses — sights, sounds, The thalamus processes information. The thalamus also shuts down. can't leave it in the past. the trauma in the present and why they person feels as though they're reliving This helps explain why the traumatised that orients you in time — goes offline. prefrontal cortex — the part of the brain down. For instance, the dorso-lateral event, however, parts of the brain shut thrown at you. During a traumatic can manage the intensity of emotions "online" and your nervous systems experiences in your daily life, all of

Usually, when you process PTSD is a processing problem. What's critical to understand is that PTSD IN THE BODY

re-experiencing worse. activate the memory network and make otherwise, a general discussion will desensitise and process the trauma; of a specific treatment to properly not be discussed unless it is a part worse. Any details of the trauma should experiencing and anxiety gets much their trauma only to find all their re-professional about the details of might talk to a well-meaning untrained Sometimes, a person with PTSD completely resolve. your condition will improve and usually however, there is an excellent chance assistance of a specialist in the area, untreated for many years. With the this field and so go undiagnosed and who do not have specialised training in with PTSD seek help from professionals training to treat PTSD. Many people psychiatrist who has undergone specific such as a clinical psychologist or critical to find help with a professional If you suffer symptoms of PTSD, it's after the war. symptoms like Jenny's today, 50 years Untreated Vietnam veterans, for symptoms and remain untreated.

the repeatedly experienced during her abuse. This triggered daily intrusive memories, flashbacks during which she vividly relived the abuse in her mind and nightmares of being trapped. Jenny's anxiety was constant and occasionally she experienced panic attacks during which her anxiety was so extreme she felt like she was losing control. She also was easily startled and often looked around for signs of danger. Because she was afraid of being triggered, she spent most of her time at home in a predictable environment. This led to her developing agoraphobia — a fear of being outside in crowds — which often happens for people with PTSD. It's not uncommon for people like Jenny to go for years with these



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MIND HEALING TRAUMA

system needs to be relaxed and the entire brain needs to be online and functioning. During re-experiencing such as a flashback, brain scans show that parts of the brain continue to shut down.

As well as being relaxed, the traumatised person needs to be fully present and in touch with their body. Accordingly, therapy begins with teaching you to get grounded and relax. Strategies such as yoga, meditation and mindfulness training are all invaluable at this part of therapy, as they are fantastic at helping you stay present and stay in your body, and relaxing fight-or-flight systems. Considerable research supports the benefits of all these approaches.

The following three simple exercises are a good starting point to help you feel more present, safe and relaxed.

1 Diaphragmatic breathing

Place your hands on your belly just above your navel with your two middle fingers touching. Take a gentle deep breath and, as you do, allow your belly to rise. Your two middle fingers should come slightly apart. As you breathe out allow your belly to drop. Continue breathing this way, allowing your breathing to become longer and slower with every breath you let go. You can also imagine breathing calming colour through your heart as you do this and allowing it to soak through all the muscles and bones of your body. Practise this for a minute every morning and night and at the first signs of anxiety or anger to relax the nervous system.

2 Connecting to the senses

Traumatised people can feel numb and spaced out. This is known as "dissociation", the psyche's way of avoiding the pain of the trauma. However, when you are spaced out and numb, the brain is offline and can't effectively process the trauma so the symptoms don't go away. Being numb to negative feelings can also leave you numb to positive ones. This exercise is a starting point to ground you in the present and distract you from intrusive memories. Do it slowly with awareness.

Name five things you can see right now. Name five things you can hear. Name five things you can touch: for instance, I can feel my hair touching my neck, my foot touching my shoe. Continue on naming four things you can see, hear and touch. Cycle through three things, two and one.

3 A safe place

It's essential that the traumatised person feels safe with their therapist



For people with PTSD, the fight-and-flight system is switched on during the trauma and never properly switched off. They are left in a constant state of hyperarousal.

and begins to feel safer in their world before they begin processing. A safe place exercise can help you access these feelings whenever you need them.

Imagine a place when you feel safe, secure and peaceful; it might be a place you know or one you make up. What can you see, hear, smell and touch when take your mind there? Activate all these sensory details slowly, one by one. Take pleasure in them. How does your body physically feel when you imagine this nurturing place? Intensify these good physical feelings. Practise this several times with a cue word; for example, "safe", "peace" or the name of the place. Then go there whenever you need to feel safe.

REMEMBERING & HEALING

Once you feel more present, safe and relaxed, you're ready to process. The two most effective evidence-based therapies used to treat PTSD are called exposure or desensitisation for memories; and EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing). They should only be undertaken with a trained therapist.

Exposure for memories is not to be confused with other types of exposure or imaginal desensitisation in therapy. It involves having the client recount the traumatic event in detail repeatedly until the emotion diminishes. During EMDR, the person is asked to remember an image, feeling, body sensation and core belief associated with the trauma while the therapist stimulates both hemispheres of the

brain, usually through eye movements. At the end of both processes, there is generally a shift in beliefs from negative to positive, more detailed memories and a sense of coherency around what happened. Most importantly, the memories no longer distress the traumatised person.

Desensitising a single memory using these techniques usually takes one to three sessions. People with multiple traumas such as years of abuse don't need to desensitise every memory because working on several has a generalising effect. If you've experienced an event you found traumatic but do not have symptoms of PTSD, EMDR can still help you resolve the unpleasant memory and associated beliefs.

Sensorimotor or Somatic Psychotherapy, based on the work and research of therapists such as Pat Ogden and Peter Levine, has also shown good results. This focuses on having the patient slowly tune into the body sensations associated with the feelings of the trauma in order to process them.

An emerging field called Energy Psychology is in the early stages of research and shows some promising results. It involves the stimulation of acupuncture points (by tapping, holding or massaging them) with the mental activation of a targeted psychological issue. A literature review of Energy Psychology techniques by Feinstein in 2012 found that 18 randomly controlled trials of good quality produced strong positive effects in the treatment of a range of psychological disorders, including PTSD.

A related emerging Energy Psychology technique is called Matrix Reimprinting. This also involves tapping meridian points while stating the problem but works to clear negative beliefs from the younger self as well. Research on this technique is also in its early stages.

The end result of effectively processing your trauma is that the memories no longer hurt you. Anxiety and avoidance, with the help of some other approaches, should also reduce or disappear. Ultimately, these techniques allow a once-traumatised you to feel free of the past, reconnect with your joy and live fully in the present. 🌟

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