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FROM THE DESK OF DR JENN HARDY

A quarterly-ish newsletter



Trauma 101

Two themes emerged when I asked for newsletter ideas: supporting people through trauma and working through your own. I couldn't pick between the two and decided to cover both.

The most consistent risk factor for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a lack of good social support system. The flip side is also found in the research. The most consistent way to prevent PTSD is the presence of a healthy support system. What does this mean? It means the help you offer as a loved one really does make a difference. You can help to prevent PTSD and also improve recovery outcomes. What else does this mean for survivors? It is super important to reach out to trustworthy people. The connections you have to supportive people will be key in your recovery.

Another note: I'm using the word trauma to mean a lot of things all at once. For you, it may mean childhood abuse or neglect. For others, it could be a serious medical diagnosis, loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, an abusive relationship, a near death experience, or vicarious trauma. Let's not decide what type of reaction a person is allowed to have. Something that may not have been a big deal to you may be extremely difficult for someone else (and vice versa).

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Working through Trauma

Though you may feel broken, it is important for you to understand that your body is made to heal. Whether your wounds are physical, emotional, or cognitive, your body knows what to do to recover. Sometimes we can find ourselves feeling stuck in the healing process. You may need to tend your wounds differently than you have so far.



1. Stuck Points: Pay attention to the things you feel "stuck" on. Maybe they are phrases or certain aspects of the trauma. "I should be over this by now," or "I should have been able to stop it," or "I should have known it was going to happen." Your job is to assess if these beliefs really are true. A lot of the time we tend to assume we had more responsibility or control than we really had...and then we feel guilty we didn't somehow foresee the future and stop it. Support people can help you get sort through things like fault and responsibility.

2. Find Your Routine: Trauma shakes up our routines. You need to do what you can to keep as many around as possible. Rest is critical (whether or not you are able to sleep) along with regular meals and plenty of water. If you loved your Saturday morning coffee run, then go if you can. These experiences help you feel connected to your life in the face of so much upheaval.

3. Self-care Makes a Difference: Avoid substances like drugs and alcohol. Burn off the extra stress hormones and adrenaline in your body (from the fight-or-flight response) through exercise. Take a good shower. Pray. Meditate. Wear your coziest pajamas. Take care of yourself.

4. Find Your Support System: They are key. Trauma is very isolating. You may be feeling a lot of shame or guilt which disconnect you from others, too. Take a chance and tell a supportive person what has happened to you. If you don't think there is a trustworthy person in your life, then it is important to consider reaching out to a therapist who can join you in your recovery.

5. Avoid Avoidance: Lastly, feel your feelings. Though a part of you may want to avoid your feelings or avoid anything related to the trauma, do what you can to work against that instinct. Avoidance will ultimately keep you stuck. It's ok to feel angry, sad, numb, confused. It's OK to take breaks from this work, just don't allow avoidance to take over your life.

Be patient with yourself. Don't demand a certain timeline for recovery. You'll get there quicker by allowing yourself to work at your own pace. I've watched so many people experience post-traumatic growth and resiliency. I'm not one to think "all things happen for a reason." I do believe we can make meaning of the things that happen to us. Keep going. You can do this. You don't have to do it alone.

Supporting Someone Through Trauma

It's awesome to me that you want to learn more about ways you can be a good support to someone in trauma recovery. Also, be sure to scroll up a page to read more about my advice for survivors. You may find yourself needing to steer them in these healthy directions if they are feeling stuck.

1. Education: This is a time when Google searches can really help. I've also posted some links at the bottom of this page. Learn what you can about typical (and not so typical) trauma reactions. If your loved one is acting really differently than you would expect, then they may be having some symptoms you didn't know were associated with trauma. Five people in the same car crash could have five completely different reactions to it. A lot depends on a complex combination of genetics, past traumas, their beliefs about themselves and the world, and their current relationships.

2. Listen, Without Judgment: So many people stay silent for fear they will be blamed, guilted, or shamed for what happened. Your job is to listen, to allow them the space to share what they feel comfortable disclosing, to avoid pushing them to divulge more, and to suspend judgment. In essence, your job is to care about them.

3. Ask Before Jumping In: Ask what they need the most help with rather than assuming. They may have felt a total helplessness and loss of control during the trauma. You help them regain a sense of power and control when you respect their decisions.

4. Don't Jump to Find a Problem: As much as you can, you want to find a balance between under- and over-reacting. The reaction your loved one is having may only suggest how extreme the situation was that they survived.

5. Use Your Support System: You don't need to go it alone either. A "support system" typically means more than one person. Part of your work likely will be (with the person's permission) pulling in other loved ones to support, listen, and lend a hand.

6. Take Breaks: Breaks are so important to avoid burnout, tend to your own needs, and restore your sense of calm. It's common to feel really rattled hearing about traumatic experiences. Follow the self-care advice in the survivor's section to work through your own vicarious trauma reaction.

I sometimes think therapy sessions are an hour long for a reason. They give us plenty of time to dive into hard topics, but they cut us off before we feel too overwhelmed and exhausted. Use this as a guide for your conversations. If the conversation is feeling like too much for you, then it may be too much for them, too.



Helpful Links:

RAINN

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
Suicide Prevention Lifeline

National Alliance on Mental Illness
American Psychological Association

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