

# The Post-Traumatic Gazette No. 12

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## Acceptance

Acceptance is a really important concept for people with PTSD and their families. Accepting that the trauma happened and had effects can free you to recover. Acceptance of the desirability of change leads to a kind of balancing act of self-acceptance while learning to change.

Denial, discounting, and invalidation cause secondary wounding of trauma survivors. Sometimes they say this pain was worse because of the lack of support. Returning Vietnam veterans were ignored, criticized, and told it wasn't a "real" war by the people for whom they fought. Incest survivors have been told they were liars when they revealed the abuse. Such attitudes block healing. Acceptance heals.

Acceptance for the survivor is not a static thing, not patient resignation to suffering. Acceptance is not approval or condoning or agreeing with or even liking the way things are or wanting to keep it the way it is. Nor is it saying "Okay, I'm messed up and someone will have to fix me," and turning your will and your life over to a therapist or the VA to fix, either. Acceptance is an attitude of awareness of what is that allows each of us to create a firm foundation for action, for change, and for healing.

When acceptance replaces the ineffective "Why me?" sort of suffering that tries to avoid pain, healing starts. Pain is a part of life. Running from it is running from life. Walking through it, you will find moments of peace and joy that are invisible when you are running away. That is one of the gifts of acceptance.

Acceptance of the effects of trauma by others helps survivors heal. Acceptance doesn't mean babying or kowtowing to every whim, but it does mean respecting the pain and difficulties trauma survivors have.

**Core healing:** In learning acceptance, I have learned to compassionately observe, respect, and encourage my trauma survivor and myself. I think of them as core healing attitudes.

In the 70's we didn't know what was happening to us because nobody did. It hurt us a lot. My husband who flew helicopters in Vietnam was hard to live with and I made a lot of very human mistakes. I thought having a problem was shameful. Today I know everyone has problems. They are nothing to be ashamed of. Acceptance of problems helps us deal effectively with them.

**Relationship problems?** Compassionately observe how your relationship works. Are you kind to each other? Are you creating safety and security for each other? Not if you're yelling and screaming and judging and criticizing. Not if you're creating and living in chaos so you can feel alive. Not if you're drinking, drugging, eating or shopping away your feelings. Those are all things we did.

When I look back at the behaviors that helped us survive, I see we had a lot of strength even if it was misapplied. You do too.

Everyone does the best they can with what they know. All of us. A lot of the ways I coped are not behaviors I want to continue. Acceptance allows me the power of choice. Guess how likely it is that I'll stop if I can't accept that I did, or still do, them? Not likely. That's why I practice compassionate observation and acceptance, and it takes practice! Not all the symptoms you have will show up in the diagnostic criteria for PTSD. "Acting perfect" isn't in there, nor is "acting like an ass." Acknowledging the ways trauma did affect you involves letting go of denial (that comfortable river in Egypt most of us were brought up on).

Acceptance for me today includes research and admitting I need help. There is a lot of help available that wasn't there even a few years ago. New ideas develop every year. That's encouraging. Try something new. Observe how it makes you feel: don't do things that are too much for you, but if you are a bit uncomfortable, that might be the discomfort of healing. I mentioned DBT in the Anger issue which is effective with suicidal borderlines (a lot of child sexual abuse survivors get this diagnosis) and with combat vets who have tried repeatedly to find help but couldn't tolerate therapy. (See a letter from someone who uses it further on). There's Cognitive Behavioral Therapy of Trauma Related Guilt in the 11th issue, Traumatic Incident Reduction in issue 6, EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, (another letter below), and many more therapies. I have used the 12 Steps to great advantage (Issue. 3) and many

trauma survivors have too. There are journaling books, meditation books, books on empowering yourself through yoga, martial arts, body work, etc. Encourage yourself to find help, to risk change, to learn from your mistakes, and to accept that it is going to take time, too.

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No one wants to hurt inside all the time or to be hurting  
those they love.

Acceptance is a balance between knowing you are okay the way you are and knowing that you do want to change. No one wants to hurt inside all the time or to be hurting those they love. Realize you don't have to hate yourself or your life or devalue them to want a better life.

Acceptance causes compassion. Compassion, which is "deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it," according to the dictionary, also causes acceptance. It is a healing cycle.

The difficulty many of us have with ambivalent feelings (I love/hate him! I love/hate war.) and paradoxes (the more I try to make myself change, the more I stay the same) is relieved by acceptance. We learn it is okay to have opposite feelings at the same time and to live with contradictions.

Acceptance allows peace, serenity and joy. When you aren't always trying to be perfect or to perfect everyone around you, life is much easier and you actually get to live it, to notice the birds and the trees and sky and feel joy welling up in your heart. This can be difficult for people who have lived chaotically for so long that it seems natural to them. The first time I felt serenity, I had to get up and leave the room. I was always agonizing over what would go wrong next. I was actually "forgetting" to pay bills and creating chaos in my life because it was more comfortable. I had to tell myself that I could learn to be serene.

When I say that the more I tried to change the more I stayed the same, I am talking about my best thinking which was "I made a mistake so I am defective/wrong/an idiot (all very judgmental unkind ways of putting it), and I'll force myself to be different, make myself change, just do it!" My experience has been that this *never* worked. Judgmentalism was ineffective. Force was ineffective. Acceptance was effective because I let go of my

ideas of how I should be, accepted the idea that I had a problem, accepted help from outside my impatient, judgmental contemptuous, know-it-all brain, and then I was changed. Just looking outside myself was a change. Trying something I hadn't thought of was a change, too.

Looking inside myself with acceptance was also a change. What is in there besides this loud scolding voice and the voice that says, "You deserve that treat (always something that will cause me more trouble in the long run, food I don't need, clothes, books I can't afford) after all you've been through?" Both these voices were trying to help me, like the whip and the carrot for a stubborn donkey, but they were ineffective. Today I accept that they still show up at times. I thank them for trying to help and explain to them that both self-indulgence and abuse have turned out to be ineffective in getting me where I want to be. I have found my inner wisdom, the compassionate one who is not abusive nor does she accept abuse, who speaks up for herself and for others. Finding her is the greatest gift of learning acceptance. She teaches me what is a healthy choice for me. That brings me back to observing how things affect me, respecting my differences and encouraging myself to stay in recovery. I'll be recovering for the rest of my life and that is just fine with me.

Whatever you have been through or done, it was the best you could do at the time. Today may be painful, but pain activates healing. We do not have to be perfect. Today we can start to acquire competence in the areas we need it, like self care, self knowledge, helping others who are going through what we've been through. Competence actually comes from not being afraid to make mistakes. We can use our pain (that's what it is for) to move us in the direction of healing. To do this we have to have compassion for ourselves, to look beneath the society's expectations of emotional imperviousness and accept the very real reasons we have problems.

**Invalidation** is the opposite of acceptance. The invalidating environment (a concept from Marsha Linehan who developed DBT) tells you that it wasn't that bad, that other people have seen worse, that you shouldn't be affected, that it didn't affect them, that you should be over it, to quit whining and act like a man or a grown woman not a baby, grow up, get over it. Most trauma survivors buy into this invalidation and try to act unaffected which takes tremendous energy, the energy they could be using to recover. The pain comes out sideways: my least favorite example is the

guy who was beaten as a child but it didn't hurt him; he wants to put paddling back into the schools. He wants to hit kids not because he's a bad person, but because he invalidates the pain he felt as a child.

Acceptance means you can give up trying to pretend it didn't happen or didn't hurt. If it didn't happen or didn't hurt, why are you having problems? Or why is your family having problems with you? It is hard to give up socially acceptable denial, but if and when you do, you give yourself power and permission to help your-self instead of struggling to suppress your pain. Look at yourself with compassion. Compassion is the opposite of self-pity. Self-pity paralyzes me as a victim. Compassion empowers me to respect my experiences and take action.

**Compassion** is the opposite of an invalidating environment. When you have compassion for yourself, you cannot invalidate your experiences so it is easier to accept that they affected you.

It hurts to bring to awareness the amount of pain you may have felt or the simple fact that you went through hell.

What do you do with this pain? Accept it and apply compassion. It helps me to observe my feelings, why I have them, which ones are habitual, why such feeling habits developed, and how, with practice, I can just feel without believing. I may feel hurt but that does not mean that person meant to hurt me. I may feel guilty, but that does not mean that I am. I say to myself: "I accept that what I've been through, even though other people have been through worse, causes me to recycle these painful feelings. That's how I am. There are real reasons why I have difficulties and I'm not going to pretend that I ought to be further along than I am." Try saying similar words to yourself. I get a real peaceful feeling from respecting my own experiences, and it is easier for me to take healing actions.

This kind of self respect takes a lot of courage in today's society. Most people want you to be fine! And there is no reason to share your pain if they are not close to you. It is okay to protect yourself from dismissive people. Remember, the societal bullshit that we should all be unaffected by anything and totally independent is promulgated by people who discount the fact that other people cook and clean and type their memos and press their clothes for them every day. They are not independent, but actually more dependent on other people's labor than most of us. They simply invalidate other people's efforts in order to feel powerful. I call this denial!

Accepting and observing symptoms and patterns of behavior instead of trying to suppress them is actively participating in recovery. First of all, what can I learn from this symptom or pattern? One thing you can learn is what actions you need to take to protect yourself from triggers. Another is that you are human. Human beings are affected by trauma.

**Observation** with acceptance will also help you learn what is ineffective. Look carefully and you will notice every time you try to make another person change to make you feel safe, it does not work. When you look inside and choose to feel what you feel and work on changing yourself, it is more effective. You can even observe the quality of your pain. Sometimes it is the old run to the bottle feeling, but how effective was that in the long run? Sometimes it is a new uncomfortableness from trying new actions, or simply the pain you've been running from. Each time you observe, accept and experience your very natural pain, you learn more about surviving it.

Sometimes you can learn more about the type of trauma and the type of person you are from your symptoms and patterns: People pleasing implies that you were less powerful than the person who hurt you. It also implies awareness of others, intelligence, the desire to be loved, and the capacity to change and grow, all of which are admirable qualities. Defiance implies a sense of your own worth—that you don't deserve this—and the courage to protest. Going into sudden rages and extreme startle responses implies that you had to defend yourself physically and that you learned fast (you're alive) and felt enough self worth to fight. Inability to fall or stay asleep implies that it wasn't safe to sleep, but it also implies a tremendous will to live. If you think about each symptom in a positive light, it can reveal strengths you never knew you had. Respect them and respect yourself for surviving and for being willing to make the effort to recover.

Observation helps you identify your emotions. Naming them is a form of acceptance. Later on in this issue, Betty, one of my subscribers, explains "Observe and Describe" a DBT skill for handling emotions instead of reacting in the same old ways.

One thing that helps me let go of old behaviors is to study them in the light of what they have done for me in the past (kept me alive, helped me cope) and what they may be doing to me today. Are they still helping, or do

they tend to bring pain into my life? I find it quite helpful to write about this. Writing it out helps me to look for patterns.

When I am observant and accepting, I look at things simply as patterns instead of stupid or bad. In this mode, it is a lot easier to change because I'm not also struggling with those old should-have-could-have self-berating thoughts. I can let go of self criticism. It would have been nice if I'd recognized PTSD before it had a name, but I didn't.

The should-haves are an old pattern called perfectionism and it isn't helpful to me today.

Another thing observation gives me is awareness of invalidating environments. I can avoid them, or I can have compassion for the limited emotional life such invalidation implies, but I no longer have to buy into it.

**Encourage** means "to inspire with hope or courage." There is lots of hope and help out there. Start with learning your triggers and respecting them and avoiding them. Eventually you can learn what actions you can take to change the way you react to triggers. Encourage yourself by accepting that it takes time, (so why not start now), that it is often a pretty slow process. Even if you find something that works quickly like the HEALS acronym, EMDR, or TIR, it takes time to be willing to risk change and growth. It is encouraging to know that if you make mistakes, you can learn from them. A sense of humor helps, too.

It takes courage to encourage yourself to take care of yourself. You were probably taught to think of taking care of yourself as more sinful than murder. I'm not kidding! In many families, kids are repeatedly told not to be selfish and self-centered when they are trying to get normal needs met: usually by people whose only mode of self care is to get drunk, overeat, sulk, scold or people-please. Trying to take care of yourself causes a lot more childhood scoldings than murder which hardly ever comes up. If you practice acceptance, you begin to see better choices. Getting drunk or stoned may have been the best you could do for the last 20 years, but today you can actually look for more effective solutions. These are usually found outside your own head.

The other day, I was telling Bob about simply accepting a bad feeling and it will pass because working the 12 steps has taught me to accept myself as I am. Sometimes there will be pain. That's life. Bob, who has been meditating every day for several years, said, "Yeah, your body believes

what your mind is thinking. When I feel upset, I go back to the breath [a meditation technique]. As soon as I am aware of my breathing, I become aware of what I am thinking. Then I focus on my breath and let the thoughts go. I've gotten so I see my thoughts as thoughts, not necessarily true." His favorite meditation book is Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Wherever You Go there You Are*.

Bob and I have both gotten to acceptance by different paths, and that is also encouraging. There are lots of roads to acceptance. You are an individual. There is a way that will work for you. Give your-self compassion, observe what you are like and what causes you pain, observe and respect where you are, and look around for things that help you, encourage yourself to try them, learning from your natural mistakes. Healing is possible.

As I said in the beginning, acceptance is not passive resignation, not approval of or even liking what is. Acceptance is the baseline for action, for finding what you can do today to help yourself heal, even if it is something as simple as saying bad things happened to me and I am not going to beat myself up anymore for being affected. I can be compassionate, observant, respectful, and encouraged just for today.

Here's a reading from Alanon's *The Courage to Change*, (April 12th) which really made me laugh. For some of us, instant gratification is too slow!

Do I have some discomfort or a problem in my life?  
Let me fix it or be rid of it now. Is it a situation I've lived with for twenty years? Fine, I'll give it 15 minutes. Perhaps I've lived with it all my life—well then, an hour, maybe even two... Is it still hanging on? Very well, I'll launch a major campaign of self criticism. What's wrong with me? Why do I have all these feelings about something that isn't important?



I'm sure I caused all this myself; somehow I'm to blame.

Heaven forbid I should surrender, accept my discomfort and pray for guidance.

Today's reminder

Will power cannot eliminate in a day troubles that have taken root and flourished in my life for decades.

Things take time.

I find that a very healing thought.

## Love Without Violence: Helping Parents Build the Powerful Self

A Workshop with Steven Stosny

I've mentioned Steven Stosny's HEALS acronym in this newsletter several times, and I finally got a chance to go see him talk about it and demonstrate it at a workshop put on by Children's Heaven of Orange Park, FL, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping break the cycle of child abuse and neglect.

Dr. Stosny had a lot of interesting information on how the brain works. We tend to file things we learned when we are in one emotional state with other things learned in that emotional state. That's why when you are depressed, life seems to always have been depressing, when you are mad at your spouse, you can remember every bad thing he or she did to you since day one of your relationship. It is all filed together.

Because of the brain's filing system pain is stored in a different part of the brain than the information about the behavior that caused the pain. That's why hitting kids is ineffective in the long run: if you ask your kids about recent spankings, they will remember them clearly, but not the reasons for them... except maybe one of them. Rather than teaching them right from wrong, hitting kids teaches them to be sneaky.

Because the brain is a better-safe- than-sorry system, developed when all predators were bigger and faster than us, it would rather blow up a hundred times mistaking your spouse for a saber tooth tiger than make the mistake once of thinking a saber-tooth tiger was your spouse and getting eaten. That's why living in the anger file is dangerous. You can wind up hitting people without a moment's hesitation and deeply regretting it.

How do you tell you are living in the anger file? If every problem in your life is someone else's fault, if people are always trying to put you down and push your buttons, you are probably living in the anger file. Stosny offers a way to get yourself out of the anger file so you can feel good about yourself.

"The more you blame, the more POWERLESS you feel and become," Dr. Stosny said. "Other people are pushing your buttons. HEALS is designed to put your buttons so far inside of you, no one can push them."

He teaches that when you are accessing the "I know how to do this/ How can I grow from this/ What will help me get through this?/Poor guy/ gal, s/he's probably had a bad day" type of files, life is just plain easier. He calls these the Power Modes.

By their very nature, people must empower themselves when they feel bad. They can do it from within—which Stosny teaches in this workshop—or by the more common methods of trying to manipulate others to make themselves feel better (punishing, nagging, etc.), or through avoidance/dismissal ("denial, alcoholism, workaholism, or 'Who needs this!'")

To change within you must identify and understand what core hurts you are feeling: disregarded/unimportant, accused (guilty, untrustworthy or mistrusted), devalued, rejected, powerless, or unlovable. When we feel those we often feel helpless, we become dependent, try to force or manipulate others into helping us, get depressed because their help is never enough, and become destructive to ourselves and/or others. These are the Weak Modes of self, although destructive mode feels like power when you are in it. Anger and other destructive acts will give you a momentary sense of power, followed by depression and defensiveness.

The true Powerful Modes of self, *competent* (not perfect, he was careful to say: competent people are not afraid to make mistakes) *growth oriented* or *creative*, healing and *nurturing*, and *compassionate* make life a lot easier. The big question is how do you get in powerful modes and stay in them?

Practice, practice, practice!

If you are thinking "why bother?" think about the difference in the way you might handle locking the keys in your car in a weak mode and a powerful one. In weak mode you start calling yourself an idiot, agonize over why you made a

mistake, maybe even try to shift the blame onto your spouse or kid (if you hadn't distracted me...) and wind up yelling at everyone. In powerful mode, you call AAA, competently seeking help, think how you can learn from this (check if I have the keys when I'm distracted), tell your kids every one makes mistakes, that's how we learn, and comfort them if they were worried. It is a totally different experience and you feel better and more powerful than you would if you had yelled and carried on.

Everyone is competent at times, so Dr. Stosny developed the HEALS acronym not to train you in skills but to teach you to move on a deep level from Weak Modes to Powerful Modes. If you can change how you think about yourself deep inside, no matter what happens, you can regulate your emotions because you decide what the experience means to you. For example, if someone is rude, does that mean you are not a valuable person? Of course not, although in a weak mode it will feel that way or worse and perhaps send you into a rage. It means they are having a bad day or week or year. In a strong mode this is easy to see. The worst it can mean about you if someone mistreats you is that you made a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes.

Dr Stosny recommends practicing HEALS on small issues first and working your way up to things that really make you mad.

Using HEALS within the family is really important because those we love "serve as mirrors of the inner self." We tend to rate our value and lovability by how they treat us. "A distressed or misbehaving child can make one feel like a failure as a parent and thoroughly unlovable. A raging or withdrawing parent can make a child feel inadequate and unworthy..." We wind up punishing the other person not so much for the behavior as for the way they made us feel. But if you punish the mirror, you are accepting the reflection as true even when it isn't.

Dr. Stosny teaches a very healing system. His court-ordered 12 week Compassion Workshops for batterers have an 87% success rate by victim report. He also teaches his methods to parents, to mental health professionals and to people who have trouble holding jobs. More information on his various workshops and publications is available from:

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# HEALS

1. See the letters flash in bright colors: HEALING (or hear the word).
2. Explain to yourself the worst of the core hurts you're covering up:
  - disregarded/unimportant
  - accused: guilty, untrustworthy or mistrusted
  - devalued
  - rejected
  - powerless
  - unlovableSay it slowly, "I feel...unlovable. " Feel it for a few seconds.
3. Apply self-compassion: Change the false meaning that hurts you. "The way s/he is acting comes out of her/his own problems. It does not mean I'm unlovable, and I can love myself!"
4. Love yourself by feeling compassion
5. Solve the problem

## A FAVORITE QUOTATION:

adapted by changing the word alcoholism to PTSD from p. 448 in the third edition of "the Big Book," *Alcoholics Anonymous*:

It helped me a great deal to become convinced that PTSD was a disease, not a moral issue: that I had been traumatized even though I was not aware of it at the time; that recovery was not a matter of will power...

At last, acceptance proved to be the key to my problem... I was finally able to say 'Okay, God. It is true that I—of all people, strange as it may seem, and even though I didn't give my permission—really really am suffering from PTSD. And it's all right with me. Now what am I going to do about it?' When I stopped living in the problem and began living in the answer, the problem went away...

And acceptance is the answer to all my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation—some fact of my life—unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in God's world

by mistake. Until I could accept my PTSD, I could not recover; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes.

Shakespeare said, 'All the world's a stage, all the men and women merely players.' He forgot to mention that I was the chief critic. I was always able to see the flaw in every person, every situation. And I was always glad to point it out, because I knew you wanted perfection, just as I did. AA and acceptance have taught me that there is a bit of good in the worst of us and a bit of bad in the best of us; that we are all children of God and we each have a right to be here. When I complain about me or about you, I am complaining about God's handiwork. I am saying that I know better than God..

When I focus on what's good today, I have a good day, and when I focus on what's bad, I have a bad day. If I focus on a problem, the problem increases; if I focus on the answer, the answer increases...

This passage has had an extraordinary impact on my recovery and my relationship to Bob, all positive. You can get a copy of the Big Book at any AA meeting for about \$6.00. Most libraries have it, too.

## Readers Write:

After writing about Dialectical Behavioral Therapy in the issue before last, I got a note from one of my subscribers saying, "It's very helpful, but it takes a lot of practice."

I sent her some questions: What about it is helpful?

...I needed tools to help me get in touch with my feelings, etc, and how to describe them. DBT helped me become aware of how to communicate so others would listen and respond. Doing DBT in a group setting is very helpful—to get feedback and suggestions on what skills would be effective

to use for a situation I was unable to process. Doing it alone is helpful especially while waiting for my counselor to call back in a crisis situation. DBT asks you to stick to the facts, identify the emotions both suicidal and pleasant thoughts. DBT also lists words to choose from when unsure of how to express an experience.

Which/what skills helped you the most?

The Diary Card, Skills Check List, Observe and Describe, Mindfulness (being in the moment), Self-soothing, Pro's & Con's, Radical Acceptance, learning to ask for what I wanted, being able to say no! "Dear Man," (an acronym for learning how to ask for what you want: Describe, Express, Assert, Reinforce, Mindful, Appear confident, Negotiate), "Dear Woman" (ditto: Describe, Express, Assert, Reinforce, Wise Mind, Optimistically, Mindfully, Appear confident, Negotiate). All of the above and the others not listed have helped me through tough decisions and becoming aware of pleasant moments, too.

I have enclosed copies of the Diary card and skills list and some other DBT worksheets that I had extra copies of. You can use the worksheets in the book and permission is freely given to photocopy them as needed.

The being in the moment is from Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (a manual of meditations). He also wrote *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (easy to read); *Breathe: You Are Alive*; *Peace at Every Step*; *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*; *Touching Peace*; *Being Peace* and many other books. Also *The Way of the Journal* by Kathleen Adams. Also for phobias, Raestruann Dumont's *The Sky is Falling*, see chapter 15 for instructions and worksheets.

How do they help?

They help me get in touch with what I exactly am feeling—the facts; the who, what, where, when; the how or why. They help me find the answers I'm searching for to my behavior and problems and dealing with difficult people also. I'm able to find my own solutions instead of depending entirely on my counselor or husband or others. It's a step by step process. The "Breathe" meditation helps me to relax before tackling the problem and often to become centered or balanced in my thinking.

How do I practice?

When you see the copies I've sent you, you'll be able to understand how we practice. We first try it on little unimportant issues, gradually getting

into the real issues. We learn what skill to use by deciding what the issue is maybe first. We may decide to use more than one skill or even several skills before we are finished with the process. We practice keeping track of our feeling levels throughout the day, and emotions, the triggers to both and our actions or reactions to them. For instance in Observe and Describe, we note the pressure and step back looking at it non-judgmentally, get in touch with our emotion-feeling noting the intensity to which we feel it 0—10 scale or 0—100 scale. See it as a wave ebbing and flowing across the sandy beach. Try not to block the emotion or to support it. Don't try to get rid of it either or push it away. Don't try to keep the emotion around; don't try to hold on to it; don't amplify it; remember you are not your emotion; Don't necessarily act on emotion. Remember times when you felt different; practice loving your emotions; Don't judge them; Practice willingness, radical acceptance of your emotion. Some of these emotions are fear, guilt, shame, sadness, depression, anger, etc.

Skills training is all about acquiring the ability to understand what's going on with you and the skills to manage it. What you learn in group you take home and practice.

I'm enclosing a blue pamphlet on "Self-Injury" I found it very helpful myself and have shared it with others who were glad to have a workbook that helped define those destructive feelings. (Understanding Self-Injury: A Workbook for Adults, available from Pittsburgh Action Against Rape (PAAR) 81 South 19th St, Pittsburgh, PA, 15203) It is much like DBT only it is set to one topic, self injury or suicide. Word lists are listed and questions asked to help get me in touch with why I feel like self-injuring, etc. ...It helps me when I have no one to share these feelings with to keep me safe until my therapist is available or the feelings pass.

With all these methods they become second nature after a while and you'll find you're doing DBT—phobia— self-injury, breathing meditation, being in the moment automatically. They all work together and do, if practiced and applied, save lives, sanity, self esteem— as you are putting the effort into it, not into being dependent on another or a therapist for help. They are important and useful, but you need a plan of action for those times we're alone...

If you use this sign it —Betty from Rhode Island. Thanks Betty

I am 43 years old and have suffered from PTSD most of my life. Neglected and molested as a way of life as a child then throat slashed and announced D.O.A. at ...[the] Hospital. Emergency surgery, recovery—it's a miracle I am alive! Then rejected by my father, blamed for bringing shame to the family by my mother, feared by my siblings who not only suffered the shock of the incident happening so close to them but also [had] to listen to my night terrors... Then raped three weeks after getting out of hospital by the male nurse that had saved my life (by sticking his hands in my throat to pinch off the pulsing, slit arteries).

I needed help with the PTSD. But the sickness inside me had no name. I just suffered severe paranoia attacks, flashbacks that froze me in another dimension, hyper-vigilance and the inability to connect ... sexually.

I was knifed in 1968 at age 15.

On Ash Wednesday, 1996 (Feb. 21) I underwent an EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing) treatment and though I didn't know it at the time my whole inner-life was changed. I no longer have any of the PTSD symptoms associated with the knifing incident. My daily experience of life is so changed for me it has been like being born-again, or like being on a wonderful honeymoon with truly a best friend who knows the meaning of loyalty. For a while every day brought a new revelation of "Oh, so that is a normal fear and that is normal awareness of my surroundings". My body feels relaxed in a way I don't recall ever knowing about except, for some reason, it feels like before I was 8. I do not even feel each person's pain like it was my own anymore. Which is a good thing. One can be compassionate without feeling a debilitating harmony with the pain. My boundaries are set and secure. I relax. I am not on constant guard duty protecting myself and those whom I love and are responsible for, anymore. It's just an average day, in an average life in an average country with an above average history ... EMDR may not be the answer for everyone but it was the ticket for me. It came at the end of two and a half years of traditional talk therapies that may have played a role, though why it took two and a half years for one therapist to finally say, "Hey, maybe you have PTSD and I know someone who does some new techniques to alleviate it' is beyond me.

—Suzanne S., August 15, 1996.



I wrote and asked for permission to use her letter and if the effects had lasted, and got the following reply:

There may be many paths for people to find their peace, but surely EMDR was the miracle cure for me...

The effect of the EMDR's has been immediate and long lasting, appearing at this point to be permanent. I believe they are because it is as if my inside chemistry has changed. I no longer am triggered into flashbacks, etc. and I recognize when I have the normal "flight of fight" response in appropriate settings that I don't feel as I did before the two EMDR's. The fear is much milder though real...

I did not have a significant "connection" with the therapist... [Francine Shapiro, Ph. D., who developed EMDR suggests doing it in the context of an ongoing therapeutic relationship.-Ed.] In fact I was quite fed up and wanting to be finished with the whole seemingly endless process... I had been told that I could simply go and get the treatment... I did know and trust the two doctors who recommended I try the new procedure... I had been working very hard in traditional forms of therapy and yet had had a major setback and actually had thoughts of suicide precipitated by flashbacks of feelings I still felt helpless to escape. I think this fact is significant because I believe EMDR treatment stands on its own. My Vietnam vet brother in law...has had an EMDR and his wife of 20 + years (my sister) says he is a changed man in an unexplainable inner sense. He is more at ease, less argumentative, and sleeps better...

When I received my first treatment, the therapist said it was one of the first since his training, so he actually read from his text to me some of the steps we were taking... So it's my opinion that it was the treatment that helped me, not necessarily the skill of the treater. It is proven powerful and effective.

Suzanne S., 3/23/97

My thanks to her for sharing.