

The Post-Traumatic Gazette No. 19

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Repetition and Recycling

Repetition is the only form of permanence that nature can achieve.

Unrealistic expectations can be a serious problem in the trauma recovery field. Sometimes an unrealistic expectation about the results of trauma therapy is simply miscommunication. The traumatized person thinks “this will fix me forever,” and the therapist thinks, “this will help him or her deal with an ongoing problem which may come up again.” The survivor may feel like therapy didn’t work if at some later date, further stress brings back some of the symptoms. The reality is that further stress is likely to bring back symptoms and feelings, and what was healing and effective before probably will be again.

Unrealistic expectations can also result if the therapist’s enthusiasm and inexperience leads him or her to suggest that if you just get it all out (as they often did in rap groups for vets in the 70’s and sometimes do today with other therapies) then you’ll be fixed permanently. If they’re not fixed, then trauma survivors, like most people, tend to blame themselves.

Therapists get burnt out if they have unrealistic expectations about “fixing” people. Trauma survivors need a therapist who validates and empowers them, not one who fixes them.

True healing is knowing that it is okay to ask for help again.

The reality is that many people with PTSD are re-triggered by current events or by further personal traumas or simply by stress. I call this recycling. When this happens, they need more help. If the therapy, or program, or tool they used before helped, it will probably help again. True healing is knowing that it is okay to ask for help again.

When I’ve been thinking, “Why aren’t I over this yet? Why am I still having bad feelings? Why aren’t I perfect yet and perfectly happy?” I remember “Repetition is the only form of permanence that nature can

achieve,” (a quote from George Santayana in Overeaters Anonymous’ *For Today*). It brings me back to reality and it brings me comfort and hope. I know that if I do today what helped me yesterday or last week or last year or ten years ago, that if it is a healthy choice, based on principles of recovery that have brought me to a better place in my life today, it will help me again. When I recycle old feelings, behaviors or PTSD symptoms, I know that I need to repeat the actions that helped me get through them in the past.

One of the actions I repeat is writing. Where am I emotionally and what is happening to stir up these feelings? What tools can I use to help myself.?

I think writing helps me so much because I have an incredible capacity to go numb. To find my feelings I have to quite literally do detective work. When I only think or talk about them, I can forget my insights quickly—sometimes instantly! For me writing helps me get the stuff out of my head onto the page where it is easier to see patterns and harder to forget.

My list of actions to repeat runs from journaling or phoning a trusted friend to reading a recovery book, going to a meeting, or talking to my sponsor. I also meditate, pray, go outside, take time to think before I act, all of which I learned during my efforts to recover. I think keeping a list of healthy actions I can take is very important. Among other things, you can schedule a refresher session with a therapist. You can go back into therapy for the duration of the new stress. You may want to repeat actions you took while in therapy which you have gradually stopped doing, like meditation, journaling, making art, going to a support group or whatever.

There is a big difference, I’ve noticed, between knowing how to recover and actually doing it. Part of this, for me, is laziness and complacency. Part of it is human nature.

Another problem is the constant bombardment of popular phrases: “you should be over that,” “get over it,” “been there, done that,” which devalue and degrade everyone in the culture, especially the people who use such phrases. People say them so much we feel like we *should* be over it. Remember, *everything after the word should is bullshit*.

Trauma survivors who use those phrases—which are numbing rituals like “It don’t mean nothin” was in Vietnam—are not “over” the things they discount. If they were over them they would have no need, no reason, to discount them. Numbness has sealed over their capacity for empathy or

compassion, which puts them in the painful position (not that they know it) of hurting other people and then blaming the other people for being hurt.

Those phrases are also a defense called *denial* which most of us use to protect ourselves against knowledge that is too scary to face.

“Why do they dwell on it?” a guy who works at the VA said to Bob the other day in front of several friends of mine who are also trauma survivors. This kind of disrespectful remark usually winds up making a trauma survivor—or his or her spouse—feel terrible. It certainly hit me hard.

Using the pattern I learned from Steven Stosny’s HEALS technique (see issues 7 and 12), I tried to identify what hurts: It was both disrespectful and devaluing, so I reminded myself that I have more resources today than I did when I first heard remarks like that. I can respect my own experiences and those of others. I can value my own experiences and those of my friends, and I can speak up. This guy needs information. Everyone does.

So I told him there were certain experiences that people never get over. Maybe he had not had such experiences. I said it is a sad thing to hear an intelligent person defending himself against the knowledge that something traumatic could happen today that could change his life forever by discounting other peoples’ pain. I said that is denial and it is probably useful to you, but it doesn’t change reality. Some things change you forever. Some things you don’t get over.

This incident was a secondary wounding for the trauma survivors at the table. Bob’s eyes were glittering, and one of my friends was about to launch herself across the table at this guy.

Moments like that often bring back PTSD symptoms. First of all it can’t help but resurrect that “feeling of detachment or estrangement from others.” Here’s someone else who doesn’t understand and is judgmental. The feeling of being judged and found wanting is very painful to most people so the next symptom that emerges is anger. Controlling that anger through repression usually slides people into emotional numbing and avoidance of others. If you isolate—especially if you believe the “should be over this” bull—no one can hurt you, but there is no one to talk to about it, so it stays with you. Depression results. Sleeplessness, nightmares,

intrusive thoughts, lack of concentration, disinterest in activities that were enjoyable, all can come back from one such incident.

I think most trauma survivors experience such incidents often. When one happens, it is important to identify it as a secondary wounding experience and to respect the fact that such experiences hurt. Everyone is hurt by being devalued, judged, found wanting. This hurts us, probably more than it hurts most people, because we're already hurt. Respecting that can send you back to your list of helpful actions, your journal, your group, your therapist, back to doing the things that helped in the past, meditation, running, yoga, practicing the HEALS acronym. (I try to offer new ideas in every issue.)

Please remember, you don't have to suffer alone!

You don't have to be perfect

You don't have to be over it

You only have to be you: human being affected by what he or she has been through. Healing, not healed. Recovering, not recovered.

No one expects diabetics to "get over it," and stop using the insulin that keeps them alive and helps them control the symptoms of their disease. PTSD seems to be more like diabetes than like cancer or the common cold.

One ironic note, some "spiritually evolved" health conscious people are now blaming people who have cancer or the common cold for having it. They have twisted even the extremely important mind-body connection into victim blaming. I call this "spiritual de-evolution." It is an ironic comfort to know that nobody escapes this crap.

So, even if others expect you to be over it—you don't have to buy into it—you don't have to expect yourself to be over it.

What you can do when symptoms come back is validate yourself and repeat the actions that worked before. As you gain some relief, you can also reach out for new tools that will help you recover even more. They are being developed or discovered all the time.

PTSD vs EMDR and the winner is...

From: William P .

Dear Patience,

A few months ago, I was surfing the net and stumbled across something you had posted about PTSD. As a former Ranger, who had served in a combat capacity in Viet Nam, and had been diagnosed with PTSD in 1991, I found that topic worthy of some investigation. Having had years of therapy by both private and VA therapists, I felt, 1) that I had enough knowledge about PTSD to write my own book about it, and 2) I had, according to the last therapist I saw, received maximum benefit from this counseling, In other words, I was as good as I was going to get. And although I felt better than I once had, most of the time, I still suffered to a great degree from all of the common symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, distrust of anyone and everyone, etc....

While reading through the things posted on this bulletin board, I was especially, interested in something titled, "EMDR, works for me." The article by one Ric O'd., told of his being an ex-marine, who had spent time in the Nam, and like me, had tried to put his life back together after the war, and like me had not had a great deal of success, and what little he did have, probably was due to the new anti-depression drugs that are available today. As this fit me to a tee, I read on with interest. He told of coming upon this different type of therapy, EMDR, and that it had worked wonders in his life. He even dared others to try it, and offered to donate \$100 to any charity one chose, if they gave it an honest try and could honestly say that it had not helped. Never let it be said that an army ranger did not accept a dare from a mere marine. So after much research to learn about what I was sure was some kind of new age crap, I found a therapist here in Tampa and made an appointment. Within 2 months I knew that I had lost the "bet," but had been given a part of my life back, that I thought was gone forever. I want to be very honest about this, as to not give anyone false hope, its not as though Viet Nam didn't happen, that is a part of my life that I will never forget, nor will I forget growing up with 2 alcoholic parents, or being sexually molested as a boy, or the fact that as the driver of

a car at 17 years of age one of my best friends was killed when the car left the road at over 75 miles an hour . Talk about survivor guilt....

What I'm trying to say here, that in spite of the things that happened before and during Viet Nam, I am more mentally and emotionally stable then I can ever remember being in my life. Add to that the fact that this change occurred in 7 or 8 one hour sessions with a therapist and EMDR.

And by the way this isn't just me saying this, its what those, close to me, my girl friend, my kids, even my ex-wife for Christ sake says, some times I want to pinch myself to see if I'm dreaming, but then again, I don't want to wake up if I am. As my therapist told me in the beginning, she has treated approximately 150 patients, and that she has never had anyone be worse afterwards, and that she has never seen anyone stays the same. In other words everyone has gotten some benefit from the therapy, from a little relief, to earth shaking. I'm probably a bit closer to earth shaking than dead center, but I'm by no means her biggest success story. I am however, a "poster boy" for this stuff. And that is my purpose for writing.

Someone took the time to share his experience, strength, and hope, and because of that my life has been blessed with a miracle. I can't even tell you exactly how it's different, it just is. I guess it's kind of like sex, until you've done it no one can really explain what its about, and once you've been there, no one has to. I can only say that although I know the world hasn't changed, it feels like it has. It's a little safer now, a little less overwhelming, maybe even a little friendlier. It's a little easier to let my guard down, to extend my hand in friendship, to say to those I care for, "I love you." And that I believe is a miracle.

My one wish to make this all complete, is to be able to make a difference in just one person's life. So feel free to use my experience in any way that you like. You can print it, save it for some later date, pass it on in any way you think might benefit others. Because like they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, you have to give it away to keep it. I don't know if that applies here, but I'd like to pass it along, just the same.

Thank you for the work you've done and are doing, because if you hadn't had that PTSD bulletin board, I wouldn't have seen Ric's story, and this story wouldn't be my story.

Thank you and God bless Sincerely, Bill P.

10 Things You Can Do for Yourself Today:

Self-talk

1. Look in the mirror. Say to yourself, “You do not have to be perfect today.”
2. If you get angry, identify the feeling underneath it. Is it despair, disrespect, fear, grief, useless, worthless. Say to yourself “I feel _____.” Then say to yourself, “Because I feel _____ doesn’t mean that it is true.”
3. Invent an affirmation for each uncomfortable feeling, like “I can love myself,” to replace feeling unloved or unlovable, “I can hope for better times,” or “This too shall pass,” for despair. “I can respect myself,” for feeling disrespected. Writing them down on a 3 by 5 card helps if you often get overwhelmed.
4. When you have an uncomfortable feeling, ask yourself what has triggered this feeling? When did I first feel like this? Is it a pattern? Then remind yourself: “I have more resources to deal with this feeling today than I had before I started to recover.” Keep a list of helpful actions in your pocket and do one of those things.
5. Say to yourself, “How important is it? How important is it compared to my peace of mind or my serenity?” This is an important point for people who are triggered easily.
6. Say to yourself, “Would I rather be right than happy?” This is one that always helps me, because at one time I would have rather been right. Today I would rather be happy. Being “right” doesn’t seem so important. This ties in with #1, not having to be perfect.
7. Say to yourself: “This person may be having a bad day which has nothing to do with me. I do not have to take this personally. I don’t even have to point out to them how badly they are behaving. I can let it roll right off me like water from a duck’s back. It’s got nothing to do with me.”

8. Say to yourself when someone is yelling or nagging: “This is good practice in the realization that words are only sound waves.” Then laugh. (This is a quote from Bob)

9. On bad days, say to yourself, “Experience is what you get when you don’t get what you want. I guess I’m getting a lot of experience today.”

10. Say the serenity prayer: “God (or Higher Power), Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change [I always mentally list what is bothering me at the time], Courage to change the things I can [me and my actions and reactions], and the wisdom to know the difference.” I sometimes add another line: “and the willingness to know the difference.” Then I laugh at myself.

11. Say to yourself, “Just for today I can take healthy actions for myself. It is a one day at a time thing.” This really helps when new actions are unfamiliar and scary or when taking healthy actions seems boring and stupid.

12. Say to yourself, “I deserve to recover. Whatever happened to me and whatever I did to survive, I deserve to recover.”

13. “This too shall pass.” A good thing to say on bad days. It may feel like it will last forever, but in the nature of the universe, nothing has so far so it probably won’t.

14. “I am a human being, therefore worthy of respect, compassion, and kindness, and I can give them to myself

Okay, so I can’t count! Hope they help.

The Way of the Journal: A Journal Therapy *Workbook for Healing, Second Edition*

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From Preface to the Second Edition:

In the four years since *The Way of the Journal* was published, there has been a controlled explosion in the field of journal therapy...Throughout it all, The Center for Journal Therapy (PO Box 963, Arvada, CO 80001) has held a steady vision of making the healing art of journal writing accessible to all who desire self-directed change. Hundreds of psychotherapists have now attended the Clinical Journal Therapy trainings...

The *Way of the Journal*, originally written as the outcome of my work with sexual trauma survivors, has proved itself to be a theoretical and developmental model useful for people in recovery from all types of traumatic stress, as well as those who have had a difficult time getting started with a therapeutic writing program and for therapists who wish to offer a clinically sound approach to writing. Letters from readers and users all over the country confirm that the workbook is doing what it set out to do: Offer a practical pragmatic, theoretically grounded way to use journal therapy techniques and interventions for the healing of body, psyche and soul... The vital tools of structure, pacing and containment continue to dominate the theoretical ground of this workbook, and I am more convinced that ever of their necessity in a holistic approach to therapeutic writing. A popular writing practice these days is “morning pages,” a daily three-page free-write to be done immediately upon awakening. Again and again I have heard stories from clients and clinicians about depressives and traumatic stress survivors whose struggles intensified with morning pages... Extended stream of consciousness writing first thing in the morning, when the membrane between the conscious and un-conscious minds is most permeable is a high level journal therapy intervention that may not serve those

whose “first voice” is often critical or fear based. Applying the guidelines of structure, pacing and containment quickly shifts the focus and alleviates potential problems. When clients follow suggestions to write one page instead of three, or walk the dog first (or shower or eat breakfast) or write “evening pages” or intentionally bring in that balance of positive or humorous news, they report remarkable shifts back to writing that guides and resolves.

From The Journal Ladder

“The Journal Ladder...ranks the most frequently used journal therapy interventions onto progressive “rungs” that start with maximum structure, pacing and containment, and gradually move toward insight, fluidity and openness. Balance and permission are built into each stage. The continuum ends with free writing, where most people begin.

“The lower numbers represent ways to write that are well structured, concrete, practical and immediately useful. As you move up the ladder, the techniques become increasingly more abstract, insightful, and intuitive. The lower range is good when you’re feeling overwhelmed, want information quickly, or don’t have much time. The midrange is good for uncovering patterns and connections. The upper range is good for connecting with inner guidance and creativity...”

From Jump Starting The Journal...

“What’s wrong with this picture? “•In a recent study, 88% of ...PTSD clients said they wrote in a journal regularly (60%) or intermittently (28%)...”

“•96% felt fearful, frustrated, overwhelmed, insecure, intimidated, traumatized, ashamed, or bored with their journals. Only 4% said they did not experience obstacles, blocks or barriers to satisfying journal keeping.

“In practically every case, to a greater or lesser degree, the journal process contributed to chaos, internal struggle, consumption of emotional energy, compulsivity, affective flooding, overstimulation or disempowerment. The discomfort was so high that many clients perceived the journal as a sort of psychoid cod liver oil: The cure was worse than what ailed ‘em....

“What’s the opposite of free writing?... a ten step ladder that starts with the most highly structured, highly contained, highly paced journal technique (Sentence Stems) and gradually builds in fluidity and openness...

“...You can learn to match your mood, issue or desired outcome with a journal intervention that enhances the likelihood of success. You’ll learn for instance that highly charged emotional states are served by techniques that maximize containment, such as Clustering or 5-Minute Sprints; That a sense of internal chaos or disorganization is soothed with the structure of AlphaPoems or Sentence Stems; and that overwhelming feelings can be managed with the pacing of the Structured Writing Exercise. You’ll also learn that when you want to access inner wisdom or intuition you can go up the scale to the more insight-oriented techniques— Character Sketch, Dialogue, Springboards, Artmaking, Poetry, Dreams, finally Free Writing.

A wonderful, helpful, healing book. The book takes about ten days to complete if you work every day. I find it helpful to have different writing tools for different days and moods. www.sidran.org

Unspeakable Truths and Happy Endings:
Human Cruelty and the New Trauma Therapy by
Rebecca Coffey, The Sidran Press, 1998,

Rebecca Coffey’s book is flat out wonderful, a book to treasure and reread.

For those of us who are sick of the “I’m numb, so why aren’t you?” school of victim bashing (described even more amusingly by a survivor as “I’m split off, so why aren’t you?”), this extremely readable book offers a lot of insight.

The first chapter, “The Helping Hand Strikes Again,” talks about the human need to protect ourselves from unpleasant truths. Ms. Coffey goes on to discuss real traumas, using the actual words of survivors, sitting in on

therapy sessions, aware that it changes the session, but also learning about the skills a trauma therapist needs. She quotes from the best experts in the field, looks at all sides of the recovered memory question, and talks about healing as a process. In 226 pages, she covers a lot of ground in a very healing way. This is a book for survivors because it will give them hope. It is a book for people who don't know about trauma. It will give them insight and empathy. It is a book for family members and therapists, too, full of insight, wisdom and compassion.

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Quote on finding a therapist :

“As Dr Bessel van der Kolk of Boston University explains, most trauma survivors benefit from one-on-one psychodynamic therapy. It “allows disclosure of the trauma, the safe expression of related feelings, and the reestablishment of a trusting relationship with at least one person...”

“Therapists do rest much of their practice on the basis of their professional training. But perhaps as much as anything else, they rest their practice on their integrity and personal talents—on their perceptions, feelings, insights, intuition, and the degree to which they can hear unspeakable truths. “Pay more attention to the therapist’s intellectual and emotional equipment than theoretical system,” Dr. van der Kolk advises survivors. “Pay attention to whether the therapist really wants to hear the troubles you have to tell. Ask yourself, ‘Do I feel validated? Is the therapist really listening to my story?’”

“If validation is one important selection criterion, Dr Judith Herman, Director of Training at the Victims of Violence Program at Cambridge Hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts, makes clear a second criterion and one that seems of equal importance: An effective trauma therapist empowers the survivor rather than imposes a cure...”

“Time and again, survivors asked questions—about flashbacks, about perpetrators, about the tricks of memory, about how their own psychohistories may have made them vulnerable and may have colored their adaptations to life. I was relieved to see that, without

fail, survivors' questions were welcomed as a contribution to the therapeutic process, not a distraction from it. Questions were always met with reasoned and clearly helpful answers. (p. 85-86)"

Quote on the course of therapy:

"...expert trauma therapists such as Dr. Scurfield offer newcomers to therapy more than platitudes. They structure therapy so that it usually begins not with deep memory exploration but with more ordinary matters such as education, diagnosis, and symptom control. Many therapists offer hypnosis, cognitive therapy, meditation, relaxation techniques, or medication to help survivors manage pain and thereby increase the competence with which they face the tasks of daily life and the courage with which they face the prospect of memory exploration. Most importantly, trauma therapists explain to survivors that therapist and survivor will jointly pace the exploration of traumatic memories... to err, if at all, on the side of caution, lest exploring trauma simply retraumatize the survivor...(109-10)"

Samples of therapy:

"Madeline's therapist: "Madeline 'remembered' that a flying saucer had landed and that alien creatures that looked like ants had come into her bedroom at night and put things up her nose. She was sure this had happened and she was very worried about telling me because she was afraid it would make me think she was crazy. As we talked about it we came to understand that it was a way of remembering at a time before she could allow herself to remember, that something alien and horrific had come into her world and changed things forever. We talked about the image of something being put up her nose as a displacement of an image of a rape. The alien beings were about the loss of what was familiar to her at the occurrence of the rape and it was as though what happened was so alien that it made her feel alienated from everyone. She talked about walking around school and everyone pointing to her, "That's the one," as though she were an alien from outer space. As we came to understand it not as a psychotic delusion but as a way of holding a memory she was not ready to face, she became fascinated and delighted with the resourcefulness of her mind. She calmed down enormously and was

delighted with her ability to survive. And it really was wonderful...” (p. 125)

Therapist: “Memories are very complicated things. There’s a reason for each memory, and there’s always a kernel of truth in it. But we shape memories over time. It’s not unusual for a memory to be a screen memory, which means you can put together different events into one. That doesn’t mean the memory is a lie. It’s a condensation. It’s like shorthand. But it is only over time that you start to sort screen memories out and know that about them. Sorting them out is a matter of taking seriously what you remember and looking at the images, looking at the pieces. Yeah, they may shift and sort themselves out over time. But that doesn’t mean you are crazy. That’s just how the human memory works...” (p. 127) Therapist: “I think that’s been under-recognized, that the paradox about symptoms and way of coping is that they’re usually both— ways to escape and ways to remember and reenact.”

Madeline: “It’s the mind’s way of surviving and of coping. So I don’t go insane. I think I did a good job.”

Therapist: “You have survived. And you’re not insane.” (p128)