

The Post-Traumatic Gazette No. 7

© 1996, 2021 Patience H. C. Mason Feel free to copy and distribute this as long as you keep the copyright notice and give it away

Solace for the Self: A Facet of Healing from Trauma

Anna Salter, Ph.D., spoke at the annual conference put on by the Gainesville Commission on the Status of Women, Sexual Battery Committee this May. Her focus was on the effects of child sexual abuse but she said something which got me thinking. Therapists need to teach each client methods of self-soothing, solace they can provide themselves. Having to turn to the therapist to receive solace creates dependency in the client and resentment (and often the diagnosis of borderline) in the therapist. For the millions of trauma survivors who never see a therapist, methods of self solace are even more important.

As Steven Stosny's book, *Treating Attachment Abuse*, reviewed in last month's newsletter, points out, batterers hit others to feel better about themselves. Teaching them how to feel good about themselves in more effective ways (through the development of self-compassion) removes the cause of the battering and it stops. Solace from within stops the cycle. It also helps stop the cycle of being abused! Teaching battering victims self-compassion made them less willing to put up with abuse. Turns out victims are not good at self- compassion either. Stosny teaches a very simple technique called HEALS, a series of self-soothing actions which I discuss in this issue.

Twelve Step programs also provide many forms of self-soothing to replace compulsive behaviors which once were self-soothing but now cause more problems than they cure: the Serenity Prayer is one tool for self-soothing because it focuses you on your part in things, what you can actually change. Another is applying the first three steps to any problem. Letting go, admitting that you can't do it alone, which is what admitting you are powerless in the first step is, opens you up to receive help from outside yourself. Powerless is not helpless. It is open to help. Program slogans such as "Progress not perfection," "Turn it over," "Easy does it," or "Let go and let God," are a form of self-soothing. "One day at a time," is perhaps the most effective of these because while most people are daunted by the idea of a lifetime of effort, they can usually do something today if

they focus on just doing it today. Talking or writing about a problem are also suggested.

Writing can be a really helpful form of self soothing. In the first issue, I reviewed *The Way of the Journal*, by Kathleen Adams, which is written for trauma survivors because they often find writing depressing. Her suggestions are very helpful.

One of Dr. Salter's recommendations for internal solace was for the trauma survivor to develop an imaginary safe place whether it be a garden, a fortress, or a boat in the middle of the ocean. Go there when you need a refuge.

Another helpful technique she suggested is when you can't stop going over and over something in your head to pretend you are looking at it through binoculars and then turn them around so it becomes very small and far off. You can also visualize taking a tape of the scene out of the VCR and locking it away.

In Visual/ Kinesthetic Dissociation, a NeuroLinguistic Programming technique discussed in the last issue, survivors watch themselves in the trauma up on a movie screen, practice stepping back from their own body and looking over their own shoulder at the screen, or shrinking the screen size, which help to give distance, perspective, and relief.

Dr. Salter also recommends internal confrontation. Trauma survivors often believe they were at fault. Many of them have internalized an abuser's voice. 'You were too pretty; you tempted me,' say the abuser or the rapist. 'You were bad so I hit you, starved you, locked you in the closet,' says the abusive parent or the batterer. 'You were responsible, you screwed up', roars the drill instructor or the commanding officer. Salter suggests visualizing another person at the age you were traumatized who is being abused as you were. Is it his/her fault? Then think of yourself. Is it your fault? Of course not! Clients have to wrestle with their own ambivalence about this. If it is your fault then you had the power to change the situation by changing yourself. Often this feels better than admitting that really bad things happen all the time without anyone deserving them.

Meditation is another form of self soothing. Most people think of it as sitting still and clearing the mind, yet Thich Nhat Hanh has a book out called *Walking Meditation* and I just bought one called *The Serpent and the Wave: A Guide to Movement Meditation* by Jalaja Bonheim (Celestial Arts). One veteran I know who was wounded in the leg does what he calls "Staggering meditation." *The Meditator's Handbook* by David Fontana (Element, Rockport, MA) discusses various eastern and western styles of meditation.

When I meditate, I visualize one of several imaginary safe places and then see myself filling up with light and love until I am green and growing again. I also

find those little daily meditation books helpful. The daily reading can focus my thoughts on growth and lead into really helpful journal entries.

If you have a higher power, he, she, or it can be used as self soothing: bathed in God's love or immersed in the harmony of the universe or the power of the sea: however it works for you, it can be a great comfort.

Reading books can be soothing. To know other people have felt this pain and worked through it really helps. So does knowing that this seemingly random collection of nutty feelings and actions has a name and a reason, PTSD, and that other people have it, too.

Support groups are also a good place to gather information on how others self soothe. I learned at a meeting to get up and get out of the house into my back yard to pray and meditate in the morning. Doing it got me out of my own head. Meetings are a place to take what you like and leave the rest, as they say, a good way of developing boundaries.

Using the telephone helps recovering people break out of the isolation that comes from feeling different. Calling people from support groups can be a way of self soothing, especially if at first you just make practice calls without sharing a lot of heavy stuff. Share a little and see if the person is trustworthy. No criticism and no advice are good guidelines.

Cognitive therapy techniques such as identifying distorted thinking patterns can be really helpful. In his book, *Feeling Good*, David Burns, MD, identifies a number of patterns such as "all or nothing thinking" (I'm perfect or I'm nothing), "catastrophizing" (bad things will happen to me—a common one for trauma survivors), "emotional reasoning" (I feel it so it's true) and gives exercises to do which gradually replace painful and inaccurate thinking patterns with ones that are more helpful and effective.

Affirmations are also an effective form of self soothing. Here is one I wrote for trauma survivors:

I'm _____ and I'm _____ years old. I am in a safe place in _____.

I live with _____, and _____ cares about me.

I can cry and be scared and every-one will still care for me.

I need to have these feelings so I can let them go.

Physical comforts, a warm bath, a quiet walk in sunlit woods, stretching, yoga, tai chi or another martial art, switching from caffeine and junk food to a healthy diet are all forms of self soothing that can be learned. Some people find intense workouts soothing. Find what works for you.

It takes time to learn anything and the process of learning is a reward in itself. *Conscious Breathing* by Gay Hendricks, PhD, and *The Wellness Workbook* by John W Travis, MD and Regina Sara Ryan are two books I'm currently reading. If tension is causing you physical pain, I recommend are *Somatics* by Thomas Hanna, and *Pain Free* by Pete Egoscue.

The Woman's Book of Comfort, and *The Couple's Book of Comfort* by Jennifer Louden and *Being A Man* by Patrick Fanning and Matthew McKay are full of suggestions for self soothing. *Getting Through The Day* by Nancy J Napier is full of suggestions for survivors of childhood trauma.

I hope these are helpful! 

The Serenity Prayer
(adapted for trauma survivors)

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I can- not change: the past, what happened to me, that what happened was traumatic no matter how effectively I have stuffed it.

Courage to change the things I can: my attitude towards my symptoms—help me to accept them as a normal response to trauma and evidence that I need to take care of myself by talking about this and getting help; my actions—I no longer have to drug or deny my symptoms. I can just accept them. My reactions—instead of freaking out I can focus on the symptom, feel what I feel, go through and deal with the pain and learn whatever it is that my Higher Power wants me to know and share about the effects of trauma on people. Finally I can change how I see these symptoms—as normal and helpful to me in my recovery even if they are painful. Eventually I will be able to help other people who share a history of trauma.

And the wisdom to know the difference: I can change my actions and reactions. Help me to be willing, teachable and to learn about myself and what I have survived even if it is frightening.

adapted by Patience Mason 

HEALS:A Useful Acronym for Self-Soothing

Steven Stosny's HEALS acronym (see previous newsletter) is a valuable resource for anyone who has been traumatized. Developed to help violent men replace the temporary high of violence with something that feels better: *compassion*, it was first used it in a maximum security prison with men who had each killed more than four people. It is currently used in programs for batterers. People who go through this program are 87% violence free after a year *by victim report*. It is also very helpful to victims who are not good at having compassion for themselves. Dr Stosny has given me permission to use it in the newsletter, so here goes:

H is for HEALING. Visualize this word in flashing neon letters as a thought stopper when you start to feel the first prickles of painful emotional arousal whether it is anger or another emotion. Stosny developed this with anger in mind, but it can also work for paralyzing waves of shame and despair. I've flashed HEALING many times in the last month when I realized the March/April issue would come out in May! Late again. The image of the word stimulates the natural healing capacity of the body and is "incompatible...[with] shame, anxiety, anger, hostility, and aggression. Since the brain cannot think 'healing' while hurting, it must switch programs to respond to your command to heal."

E stands for EXPLAIN TO YOURSELF. Here you acknowledge the worst of the painful feelings you are experiencing using a list Dr. Stosny developed:

disregarded
unimportant
accused: guilty or mistrusted
devalued
rejected
powerless
unlovable

Say "I feel disregarded (or whatever)."

Say it slowly and feel it for about 20 seconds. If you don't feel it, you can't heal it! Each time you feel this feeling, your sensitivity to its pain will go down and your tolerance for it will go up. It is like a vaccination against the power of painful feelings. Instead of painful feelings controlling you, you can deal with them.

A stands for APPLYING SELF COMPASSION to change the meaning of having that feeling. This is the most important part because you train your- self to change patterns which you have internalized over a lifetime, patterns that tell you you really are no good unless you feel good, that you are no good unless someone else validates you. This is false information. Nothing someone else does or doesn't do makes you unimportant, unlovable, unacceptable, or unworthy. This is particularly important for

trauma survivors because they tend to assume responsibility for what happened to them, whether it's a veteran saying I should have known about the ambush or an incest survivor believing s/he caused the abuse.

Here you learn to question the validity of the negative meaning your mind habitually supplies you with. HEALS also strengthens your boundaries. Say to yourself, "Does this external event or the behavior of that person mean that I'm unimportant, not valuable, unlovable?" Don't question the feeling which is valid, *question the meaning that attaches itself to that feeling*, question whether feeling bad means you are bad. Feelings are real, but they don't necessarily reflect reality. "As you heal these feelings by rejecting false meaning about yourself, you will no longer need anger, anxiety and obsessions to avoid them."

YES!

Stosny says the worst an external event can mean about you is that you made a mistake. That doesn't mean you are a mistake!

L stands for LOVE YOURSELF. Give yourself compassion. Feel compassion for yourself and others. Stosny writes: "To make yourself invulnerable to the core hurts, make yourself feel compassion." Say to yourself: "I feel disregarded, but I am regarding myself, so the fact that whoever is not regarding me is okay. I can give myself the attention I need, the importance I need, the acceptance I need, the love I need, whichever of the emotions in the list applies. I suggest going through the whole list at first because they all seem to apply to me. Stosny suggests finding the lowest one on the list that applies and that works for me, too. It's a good way to learn about and experience feelings in small bursts. Experiencing bad feelings and changing what they mean about you is preferable to avoiding them (ie emotional numbing), because it is so empowering. Being able to tolerate the pain means you have a pause button and can choose how to act instead of reacting in old patterns.

I think HEALS parallels what happens when an understanding parent comforts a small child and leads him or her through handling a feeling: H= There, there. E= Johnny hit you and it hurt. A=When someone hits you, you don't deserve to be hit. You didn't make him hit you. L=You are a good kid. S= Solution: we'll go play somewhere else till Johnny can control himself.

When a caregiver gives you compassion, you develop it yourself. When you get 'shut up or I'll give you something to cry about,' you don't learn how to handle feelings, you learn to stuff them.

S stands for SOLVE THE PROBLEM. Stosny believes "the skill of using self-compassion to heal the hurt that causes anger and anxiety must be learned before you are able to employ your full potential to solve problems...your concerns, opinions, and desires about a problem are...valid and important, but you will not be able to communicate their validity and importance until you have regulated anger and anxiety. Otherwise you will tend to blame, accuse, and attack, which is the surest way to get

people to disagree with you and disregard you, no matter how valid and important the content of your opinions.” Ironically, that’s exactly how batterers respond to victims and their advocates in the battered women’s movement. They dismiss valid concerns because of the way they are expressed. Would you rather be right or effective? Once you have learned HEALS, anyone can learn to make classic non-blaming I statements, calmly and compassionately, and work through problems.

“With repetition and practice, connections between the core hurts and higher healing thought processes replaces [the earlier learned] connections to hurts, anger, guilt, shame, obsessions and depression.”

Stosny recommends practicing this system every day, many times a day (twelve or more) till it is automatic. Don’t wait till you’re in a rage or in the depths of despair to practice it. It works like pushups or shooting baskets or any other skill. Practice makes it work. ♡

Depression and Anxiety

According to Anna Salter depression and anxiety among trauma survivors are often based on one of three causes. It is important to know which pattern is operating in order to find healing.

One cause is affective flashbacks: stuff happens today that triggers the same feelings (affect) the survivor had during the trauma. “Survivors never think, ‘Oh, I’m having an affective flashback,’ Salter said. “They just want to die, cut themselves, take drugs, get out!... Since the danger is inside, you never know when or what will trigger you. This leads to anxiety.” Identify what triggers these feelings. Knowing triggers and avoiding them is good. Desensitizing them is also good. There are various forms of desensitization (including Traumatic Incident Reduction) which are effective.

The second major cause is cognitive (based on thinking), a trauma based world view: “The assumption that you are personally invulnerable, that the world is meaningful, and your positive self perceptions are all shattered. You don’t feel invulnerable: it doesn’t happen to other people; it happens to you. There’s a sense of doom,” Salter says. Two major defenses are shattered: denial and hope. “People don’t get back to the pollyanna state, but they can get to there are good and bad things in the world and good will happen too. It takes a long period of building up safety.”

Finally Salter discussed depression and anxiety related to present circumstances. “Many people medicate the pain by putting themselves in unsafe situations or frantically working.” If it is current reality that is the problem (workaholism, acting out, using drugs, alcohol, etc., living with an abuser), those issues must be dealt with first in order to provide the safety needed to recover.

Readers Write

In a recent issue of the PTG, the program director of a trauma center wrote that society needed to hear the lessons survivors have learned from their exposure to the dark side of humanity. I thought what lessons have I learned from 15 plus years of severe abuse?

Here is a list sort of in the order that I learned them. I learned that trying to cope by avoiding the issue lasts only for a while, but that avoiding may help until the time comes when I have more access to resources and support.

Initially, while the violence was going on, if it got bad my mind would check out of my body. Then, when I was around 16 years old, the person who was beating me up left the country, and I thought ‘as long as it isn’t happening to me personally now, I can ignore it ever happened’ (and that it is still happening to others).

I learned that there are stages to awakening to the problem. For 20 years after the abuse ended, I often interacted inappropriately. I could not recognize boundaries I was violating. It took me a while to realize that familiar does not make it right. I began to see the harm I was doing to myself and others with my frantic busyness, with my misuse of alcohol and of sex. Until then I could not even recognize it as misuse.

It wasn’t until I was 38 years old that the nightmares, the terror attacks and the rage attacks began. The psyche and the body will eventually find a way “to speak the unspeakable.” I had to finally admit that trauma affects human beings.

I yelled at God for allowing such a thing to happen to anyone, much less to a child, and I was very angry to learn that surviving being beaten to unconsciousness a number of times as a child was only the beginning of the work I had to do to truly be free of the abuse. Why did I have to do anymore work? IT WAS NOT FAIR.

After a few days, God answered me, had actually been waiting for my question. The answer had something to do with choice, that s/he would not interfere with another’s choice to act harmfully. But God would walk with me into recovery. I was also warned that just because I was harmed, this does not absolve me of the responsibility for harm I continue to do to myself and others.

One of the last lessons I have learned so far is that a person has to face (not just project) their own dark side. For me to have the security to do this I had to know I was accepted and loved by God. There is a third way between the passive one and being the aggressive one. We have both personas within us. There is an identity we can forge besides either the one-up or the one-down.

I know I sometimes choose one or the other in order to feel safe. When I choose to act out that I’m in the one-up position, I’m in effect saying, “I can’t let anyone else be in charge because when I was not in charge as a child, I got knocked around.”

When I choose the one down persona, I'm saying, "I don't ever want to be in charge. If I never claim power, I will never become an abuser of power." Only, never taking responsibility or initiative is also harmful to self and others.

When I feel secure enough, wise enough, safe enough in God's love, I can be compassionate while being responsible for my own motives. I can do the work to become, perhaps, one day, a wounded-healer.

Patience, if you can use this, please sign me, Anonymous



Suggested Writing Exercises

•**Reflective writing:** When have I felt this way before? Identify what your feelings are and trace them back as far as possible into your life. Often the strength of a feeling about something that is happening today is based on experiences in a different time zone.

•**Write about the statement,** "I used to experience my feelings as buttons. Someone pushed one and I reacted. I didn't know I had a choice. I am learning that feelings are only feelings and I don't have to act on them. If I do act, I can choose new actions. If I do what I always did, I'll get what I always got."

•**Use the 12 Steps to write about a problem.** Step 1: What are you powerless over? How is trying to control it making your life unmanageable? Step 2: What can help you that comes from outside your own head? Step 3: How can I make a decision to try something new? Step 4: Write down what I've been doing that is effective and what I've been doing that hasn't been effective. Are these old patterns? Step 5: Re-read this to yourself, to your higher power and to a person you trust. Step 6: Write about your willingness to change. What have these old patterns done for you in the past? What are they doing to you today? Step 7: Ask for help with letting go in writing. You could write a prayer or write affirmations. Step 8: List people you have harmed, starting with yourself, but including people who have not received from you the love and attention they deserve while you've been wrestling with this problem. If there has been direct harm write that, too. You are human. Write about your willingness to make amends. You may have a now list, a someday list, and a never list. That's ok. It may change with time. Share this with the same person because you may see yourself as worse or better than you are. Step 9: Plan your amends in writing and check that out with the same person. Living amends, acting differently, are more difficult than apologies for some people. If it is hard for you to say you are wrong or apologize, it might be very healing to do it. To begin you can write it without sharing it with anyone. Step 10: A daily written inventory is one of the most effective tools for change, but I don't

recommend a list of sins. I write down old patterns that came up and new patterns and actions I've taken. Step 11: Meditate or pray about it and write what comes up. Step 12: Has this awakened something new in me and how will this apply to the rest of my life?

•**Your Nurturing Voice:** draw a line down the center of several sheets of paper. On the left write everything you've said or thought about yourself today that is negative. Include internal statements(I made a mistake. I'm no good. I'm stupid.), compliments you rejected, ways you put yourself down to others. Put the paper and pen down and relax. Imagine a hand coming to rest on your writing hand, a warm, loving hand, a healing hand, a hand that accepts you as you are today. Feel its warmth flow up your arm and fill you with acceptance and love. Gently pick up your pen and write on the right side of the paper positive responses to the criticisms you recorded on the left. (Everyone makes mistakes. It's okay to make mistakes. No one is perfect and you don't have to be either.) —adapted from *A Woman's Book of Comfort* by Jennifer Louden

•**Lists:** If you are feeling hopeless because things are not the way you want them to be, write a gratitude list. Start with arms and legs, if you have them. Focus on, what is in your life, rather than what isn't.

•If you feel like a failure write a list of what you have done well, whether in your life, or just today. (Got up, got dressed, got to the bathroom)

•List of beautiful moments in the day (this will lift my spirits if I've been journaling about painful things) or things which have given me joy in my life.

•Make a list of self-soothing actions you can take and keep it with you. When overwhelmed, you won't have to think. Just get out the list and do one action.

•In order to be relieved of resentments, list them following the directions in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, "The Big Book," pp. 64-71, [available at AA meetings].

•**Altered point of view:** write about something that happened to you as if you had seen it happen to someone else, someone younger than you are now if the incident happened when you were younger, or as if you were seeing it happen to a stranger. This can give you compassion for yourself and show you what you need to do to take care of yourself. What would you suggest someone else do?

•**Write about an incident from the perspective of a pet (or a Martian):** describe what the human did. This often reveals the humorous side of things we take very seriously. It can be very healing.

•**Fantasy writing:** Compensation Exercise: head one page, "Compensation I am entitled to by law," and list those; the next page, "Compensation I should be entitled to by law but am not promised," list what you think should be provided but isn't; and the third, "Compensation fantasies: what I would get in the best of all possible worlds." This is a wish list: don't limit it to material objects: get your youth back or

hope and trust or whatever you can think of, but stretch your brain and make it fun.
—adapted from *I Can't Get Over It* by Aphrodite Matsakis

•**Rewriting life:** Write a letter from someone who has hurt or wronged you, in which they express everything you would like to have heard them say to make amends to you.

Writing About Feelings:

Writing is only writing. Writing down a feeling does not engrave it in stone forever. As it flows out the end of your pen, each stuffed feeling will begin its natural journey towards release. The ones that have been stuffed longest and deepest may take the longest to release and may need to be written and felt over and over again to let them go. It takes as long as it takes.

Feelings are facts. Feelings do not have to make sense or be reasonable. Feelings are how you do feel, not how you ought to feel. No one else can tell you how you feel or what you should feel, although people often do.

“Today, Max and I try to communicate what we feel, rather than what we think. We used to argue about our differing ideas, but we can’t argue about our feelings. I can tell her she ought not to think a certain way, but I certainly can’t take away her right to feel however she does feel. When we deal in feelings, we tend to come to know ourselves and each other much better.”

—*Alcoholics Anonymous* Third Edition, “Acceptance is the Answer” p. 451.

Feelings are not facts— although we often act as if they are. We tend to believe that if I feel it it must be true. This is called emotional reasoning. A classic example is believing someone did something to hurt me because I feel hurt by it. This also applies to feelings like guilt and shame. If we have been shamed or made to feel guilty, it may have become a habit or even part of the fabric of our being. We can feel the feeling while realizing that because I feel guilty does not mean that I am guilty. I do not have to believe or act as if my feelings were reality.

Ambivalence: It is okay to feel (and think) two (or more) opposite things at the same time.

Other thoughts: The reverse of love is not hate. It is indifference.

If something that comes up makes you think of suicide, remember recovering is not going on with life as it has been, it is healing your life..

Write about yourself. If you find yourself writing and thinking about your partner or someone else, stop and refocus on yourself. Write about what you feel, using I statements (“I felt hurt,” is taking power over your feelings and responsibility for them. “S/he hurt my feelings,” is giving away power and refusing responsibility.) Details of who said what to whom, or what someone else made you feel, may help you see a pattern but often they help you avoid looking at the pattern. You must look

at your patterns! Recovery lies within yourself, discovering your patterns and slowly replacing the ones you don't like with ones you would prefer to have, not in changing and fixing other people so they can give you what you need. ¶

Why Write?

Putting our thoughts and feelings down on paper or describing a troubling incident helps us to better understand our actions and reactions in a way that is often not revealed to us by simply thinking or talking about them. In the past our most common reactions to life were often repetitious and painfully ineffective. When we put our difficulties down on paper, it becomes easier to see situations more clearly and perhaps better discern any necessary action.

—adapted from *The Tools of Recovery*, Overeaters Anonymous pamphlet.