

A New View of Trauma from Systems Theory By Joanie Connors, Ph.D.

Our understanding of trauma has been limited by a linear, one dimensional view of reality that focuses on causes and effects. Systems Theory offers a new perspective that can add other dimensions to our understanding of the role of trauma in life.

Traditional models of trauma see trauma as something awful that must be fixed or neutralized. Systems theory looks sees trauma as part of the big picture, a part of the evolutionary process and does not limit its outcomes to negative ones. Systems theory sees trauma as part of the chaotic whirlwind of change that pressures each one of us in many directions in our lives.

Systems Theory

Systems Theory is a meta-theory about the dynamic processes within and between the many levels of life. The basic tenets of Systems Theory are that everything is connected, everything changes, and seeing the whole in process is more important than looking at static elements.

Systems Theory was first developed by a biologist, Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, to describe the commonalities of all forms of life, leading the study of ecosystems. This perspective became the basis for numerous psychological theories, such as Family Systems Theory (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974), Ecological Counseling (Conyne & Cook, 2004) and Interpersonal Systems Theory (Connors, 2006). Systems Theory also spawned approaches to mathematics and computing and a bestselling management book (Senge's The Fifth Discipline).

The Linear, Logical Models of Trauma

Traditional linear models of reality describe trauma as an external, random force which impacts people, overwhelms them and leaves them damaged (as victims or survivors). Traditional thinking generally sees the stresses and changes which result from traumas as harmful and destructive, and uses dualistic labels that predict negative outcomes.

Recently, the psychotherapy fields have been confronted with the need to come up with new concepts and strategies for working with trauma. Rothschild and others have challenged the predominant treatment modalities used for working with traumatic memories. It is clear we need a broader, more complex model for what trauma is and how to best work with it.

Systems' Spiral Model of Change

The model for Systems Theory is both cyclical and multi-level. It is cyclical to reflect the change cycle, which moves continuously from stability to change and back. It is multilevel to reflect that after change, we do not return to the same level of functioning.

Systems Theory sees trauma as the extreme end of a continuum of change forces which are essential for life, health and growth. Traumatic change, like other forms of change, is seen as neither good nor bad, but inevitable and having both positive and negative aspects, as well as many shades of grey.

Change

Change is a necessity of life, a way that we adapt to our environment and keep ourselves vital and connected. Without change, people and relationships become stagnant and lifeless.

The reason that change becomes so challenging for humans is that we are pattern oriented. Humans and all organic life forms create patterns to have stability in a chaotic world. These patterns work to maintain survival needs and manage the demands of life, but they often resist adapting to changes in our needs, relationships and in the environment.

Early individual and relationship patterns have to change over time to reflect the changes inside and outside of them, to keep everything working together. Personality patterns formed early in life have to change to reflect more mature ways of interacting, or the individual will very limited in their ability to function.

When people learn from their problems and choose change, they can move beyond old ways of thinking and behaving and create more healthy patterns for getting their needs met. Spirals reflect the movement of cycles upwards as we mature and connect with an ever more complex environment. Those who resist change, who do not want to learn or adapt to external changes, may find themselves on a downward spiral.

Growing to become better people demands some degree of second order change, a change in our patterns, as we learn from our mistakes and mature. Those who have learned to accept change and to be adaptive tend to do better with the difficult forms of change that visit us. Those who are rigid and resist change are often the ones who suffer the most pain and dysfunction with difficult changes (e.g. job losses, unexpected debts) and with traumas. Resistant people are also the ones who fail to listen to early signs that change is needed, so change may be forced on them in a difficult way, such as when a spouse leaves them for not listening or they are fired from a job for not adapting to changes in demands.

Traumatic change can be positive when it breaks patterns that are dysfunctional and rigid, and forces us to look for better ways of living and relating. Traumas make us face our flaws while simultaneously disrupting our major patterns. It is complicated by the immense vulnerability that trauma brings, but many of us have to be confronted painfully by our problems before we will change and move on to higher levels of functioning. The

heartbreaking irony of trauma is that it slaps us down, but in doing so, it brings opportunities for transformation.

Interconnection

Systems Theory also sees all phenomena as connected, so people are not seen as separate from their environment - they shape it and are shaped by it. Trauma survivors are not living in a void before and after trauma visits them by some random accident. Trauma survivors are connected to the trauma environment in numerous ways, such as by their cultural conditioning about the meaning of traumas, how they shape the pretrauma environment (e.g. having a support network), their interactions with others, and their responses to traumas (whether help seeking or pathological). Trauma survivors may have more or less effective responses to trauma; to the harm and loss it brings, to the changes they are confronted with, the help they are offered, and to the disruption of the patterns that have brought them safety and stability.

Arousal

Arousal is a physical, internal response to stressors that raises our blood pressure and floods our nervous systems with hormones to activate them. Arousal is part of the stress response, which is focused on overcoming a threat (fight or flight), and it is helpful in many short-term difficulties (being late for work), but it is often harmful in the long-run.

Over time, physical arousal can break down muscle tissue and damage cardiovascular systems. In addition, arousal can become a habit. Our bodies can become habituated to aroused emotional states and this can lead to addiction to fear (e.g., anxiety disorders), anger (e.g., injustice collectors) and/or drama addiction.

With determination and practice, new habits can be established which shortcut the tendency to arousal. Two important methods for overcoming arousal addiction are meditation and relaxation. Meditation involves focusing your awareness on a peaceful, centered state so that we see the mental habits (worries, obsessions, etc.) that distract us from our wellbeing. Relaxation requires becoming aware of the ways that your body holds onto tension and where it holds onto it (e.g., knotted muscles, pressure),

Conclusion

Change comes in many forms – it can be welcomed or sought, it can be difficult and reluctantly accepted, or it can violently crash into our lives. Life on earth serves us all three forms, and the distribution is not always equitable.

However change visits us, it can be much easier to cope with if we see it as systems thinking sees it - a necessary process of life. Those who accept change and loss as part of the design of life are much better able to cope with difficult forms of change such as trauma.

Systems Theory challenges us to understand the place of change and trauma in life and to stop treating it as an enemy. While the acute damage trauma causes needs some care and can require emergency aide, we in our culture are challenged to learn how to work more effectively with trauma. Trauma teaches us about our limitations and our old patterns as it simultaneously disrupts and smashes them. This provides an important opportunity to learn about ourselves and to form new patterns which serve our needs more effectively in a demanding world.

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