

Trauma as Change Process: A Systems Theory View

By Joanie Connors, Ph.D.

Trauma has been in the news recently with unremitting media coverage of the tragedies suffered by victims of massive floods, earthquakes, and wars. This fascination with victimization appears to be exacerbating public fearfulness as it passes on the stereotype that trauma causes terrible harm.

Government and social agencies offer short-term aide to those affected by traumas and then move on to the next trauma (though there are efforts to provide more long-term aide, these are in the minority). Likewise, psychological intervention models such as debriefing have been used for decades even though they have failed to produce long-term healing and have been linked to increases in pathology (citation).

These well-intentioned approaches to trauma are based on a linear and dualistic model of reality that limits their ability to conceptualize beyond short-term consequences. This paper will describe an alternative model that is more holistic and three dimensional, one based on Systems Theory.

The Linear, Logical Models of Trauma

Linear models describe phenomena according to their causes and effects, so trauma is seen as an external, unrelated force which impacts people, overwhelms them and leaves them damaged. Linear thinking generally sees the stresses and changes which result from traumas as harmful and destructive, using dualistic labels that predict negative outcomes

Systems Theory's Spiral Model of Trauma

Systems Theory sees trauma as the extreme end of the continuum of change forces. Traumatic change is seen as neither good nor bad, but inevitable and as much a positive force as a negative one. Traumatic change can be positive when it leads to greater strength and flexibility, and to higher levels of functioning, but this is seldom noted. Examples of this include that children who have moderate exposure to childhood diseases tend to have higher resistance to disease later in life, and that people who have experienced losses in childhood often are better able to cope with loss later in life (citation).

Systems Theory also sees all phenomena as related, so people are not seen as separate from their environment - they shape it and are shaped by it. So trauma survivors are not living in a void before trauma visits them by some random accident, they are connected to the trauma environment in numerous ways, such as by their cultural conditioning about the meaning of traumas, various ways they may shape the pretrauma environment (e.g. developing a support network), their interactions with other

trauma survivors, and their responses to traumas (whether help seeking or pathological). Some obvious connections include:

- Chronic and acute illnesses both shape human culture and behavior (hospitals, medical services, social rituals for the sick), and are impacted by human diet, medical practices and environmental conditions (e.g. water and air quality).
- Cultures evolve in response to natural disasters that are common in an area and develop social traditions which help cushion the losses that occur.
- Every culture has infinite complex links between interpersonal traumas (e.g. crime, violence), and factors in their environments such as punitive childrearing practices, violence in the media, cultural myths, and poverty.
- The disparities that underlie cultural violence and abuse against minorities, women, children and other disadvantaged groups are products of their cultural history and mythology. Cultural media repeats these myths, and reinforces them.

Systems Theory, Change and Trauma

The proponents of Systems Theory have worked for 50+ years to explain that life's processes work in similar ways at numerous levels, from cells to whole beings to communities (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Capra, 1996; 2002). A unit of life at any level is called a system, and each system is seen as having common life forces, boundaries, needs, patterns, and change cycles. Systems Theory sees life progression as a circular process that is ultimately spiral, as opposed to linear. Life regularly brings us back to where we started, but in one way or another, the level of our functioning has been changed.

One essential facet of Systems Theory is how it explains life's change processes. Since trauma is a form of change, understanding how change works in life systems can give us some new perspectives on human trauma processes. Systems Theory compares human change processes to nature's change processes, seeing them more objectively and as whole phenomena which integrate renewal and other positive consequences with damage and loss.

Traumas occur less frequently than other kinds of change, and they cause more extreme changes, but Systems Theory sees traumas as one of the natural processes of change that renew life. Trauma is located at the severe end of the spectrum of change processes, and by definition, trauma is overwhelming, but not all its effects are damaging and even its most phenomenal devastations are followed by renewal in most of nature.

Change

Every living thing changes constantly. Change is part of the definition of life, because when an organism ceases to change, it is considered dead. We change with every breath we take, and replace millions of cells in our bodies every day. We change on

every level, physically, emotionally and mentally as the hours pass in each day. We change every time we experience new information and environmental conditions.

Change is not just a reaction to new information, change means that on some level this information or energy is taken in, bringing the possibility of expansion and renewing growth. Nature is constantly renewing herself, and humans as natural organisms also need to constantly renew ourselves physically and mentally, or we will grow weaker, such as the need for mental challenges to keep our intellects sharp. A good metaphor for this is our need for exercise in order to keep our muscles, bones and internal systems supple and invigorated.

The boundaries and pathways of living things are not meant to stay the same over time. Plants and animals change survival strategies with the changing of the seasons and the availability of resources around them. Humans in Western culture have worked to stabilize their environments to provide comfort and constant homogenized resources to fulfill their needs, but this has led to high rates of obesity and lower adaptivity. Plants and animals grow up and grow old according to their genetic life span while humans are trying to maintain the appearance and lifestyle of young adults, whether they are 8 years old or 68.

Change occurs when people adjust their processes to accommodate new and different information or energy patterns, and this shifting can be done internally, externally or in the interaction between internal and external. The degree of shift or change in Systems Theory is perceived as either being first order change or second order change. First order change is when the person takes the new information and makes it fit within their current personality structure. Second order change is when the change forces the structure of the personality to move in a significant way.

Second Order Change - Pattern Breaking

Systems therapists strive for second order change with their clients because they believe that old patterns must be disrupted to bring them to health. Systems thinking believes clients' lives have become dysfunctional because their boundaries and structures no longer work to keep a healthy balance in their lives.

Trauma creates opportunities by breaking patterns apart, giving us opportunities to change unproductive parts or processes of our life plan. Many people are able make healthful changes as a result of small to moderate traumas. Such people see their difficulties as signals that something is awry, and seek changes that restore healthy balances, whether physical or emotional. Some common examples are:

- A couple has a terrible fight over finances. In the next week of thoughtful discussions, they discover that they have stopped communicating about their feelings and are out of touch with each other on a deep level. They agree to seek out couple communication workshops and to spend time checking in with each other every day.

- A 45 year old woman injures her back and is bedridden for a month. She does research on back problems and consults a physical therapist who recommends workouts every day to strengthen her back muscles. After her back is healed, she decides to lose the excess weight that has been stressing her back, and to exercise more. Gradually, she makes other healthful lifestyle changes.
- A 12 year old child receives flunking grades on his midterm report card. After long talks with the child, his parents realize their main interactions with him are nagging and shaming and that they don't devote time to being with him regularly. They schedule weekly outings together, turn off the television from 6:00-8:00pm and work to recognize his positive behaviors.

Chaos, Stress & Change

Every encounter with change results in stress because the new information that comes with it forces old guidelines and boundaries to be replaced or modified, causing a period of chaos. Shifts in these patterns demand a great deal of energy during that chaos as familiar ways are let go and new habits are experimented with and accommodated.

Social scientists have been struggling to understand stress since the 1960's, when it was first identified as the phenomenon behind a great deal of physical and emotional disorder and disease. Hans Selye described the reaction of the nervous system to stress as the 'General Adaptation Syndrome' (1978). In his theory, stress reactions cycle through stages, from alarm to resistance to exhaustion where tissue starts to break down. A whole industry rose up based on the concept of 'stress reduction' and relaxation training which was focused on avoiding the negative effects of stress. The positive effects of stress got lost in this movement.

While the public at large seems to have focused on the negative aspects, stress is also a normal aspect of life which gives us information about our internal emotional and physical states. That information generally means that some boundary is being challenged. Knowing that give us the choice to respect those limits or to question if they need expanding.

The positive effects of stress can be best seen through looking at muscular health. While relaxation has many benefits, too much can lead to muscular weakness from lack of use. Muscles need the stress of exercise and stretching in order to maintain healthy tissue and exercise needs to include some over-exertion to build muscles and increase strength. Experts in physical exercise and sports now discuss the need to "play the edge", meaning to push physical demands past the point of comfort, to develop skills and muscles to higher levels.

There is some evidence that mental and emotional stresses also build strengths and improved ability to cope with future difficulties. Experiences of stressful times give people perspective on stress and traumas, they see that they are able to cope with them and that they are part of the course of life. Psychological research is now examining the phenomena of resilience, the term for people who are able to cope with

stress and change while not overreacting. Research on emotional coping has found that childhood exposures to moderate losses (moving, losing pets) makes people better able to cope with serious losses in adulthood.

Trauma as Opportunity to Change

Traumas are stressors that are so stressful that they overwhelm normal physical and/or psychological abilities to understand and cope. The Holmes-Rahe list of stressful events includes a number of common traumas at the higher end of their rankings (e.g. death of a spouse, heart attack, crime victimization).

The label of trauma victim seems to lead many people to take on the helplessness and damaged goods role implied by that label. There is some evidence that many types of victims, especially childhood abuse victims internalize a victim identity and are more likely to become victimized repeatedly in their lives (Glenn, 2003; Tuckey, 2007).

While all traumas are difficult, even some of the most profound traumas, such as war and extreme loss, can be coped with effectively. Some research has reported that a significant percentage of trauma survivors (e.g. rape victims, widows) report feeling stronger, wiser, and that they are better people after their recoveries from traumas (Koss & Burkhart, 1989).

Trauma specialists need to stop feeding the media frenzy and public mythology about the poor, damaged trauma victim. There is evidence that the negative effects associated with trauma debriefing interventions occur because warnings about pathological reactions suggest that pathology was to be expected (*). While professionals cannot suggest that trauma will make things better for anyone, they can change their own conceptualizations, and try to convey the image that trauma breaks up the solidness of the personality, which is both terrifying and freeing. We need to offer clients more than recovery, because trauma sufferers also have many choices and greater freedoms to recreate themselves.

Conclusion

The prevailing public conception of trauma and traumatic stress as harmful and disabling needs to be challenged. We should not downplay the destructive power of trauma, but must challenge the limitations that are conveyed by our present victimhood culture.

Traumas can become something we accept as part of life to some degree, for each of us will experience some traumas as our bodies age, our loved ones suffer and as we approach death. Whether our traumas are average or catastrophic, we can fear them less acutely and learn from them if we try to see their place in the many wheels of life.

Change is a journey to new lands, and though traumatic change is a brutal and sudden journey, we have some control how we cope with it and how we let it shape us.

Certainly the physical affects of stress and trauma, the financial impacts, and the strain of losing the familiar are great difficulties that set back many people, but there are also lessons and freedoms that come with traumatic change that can offer many ways to improve one's life.

References

- von Bertalanffy, L. (1968). *General system theory: Foundations, development, applications*. New York: George Braziller.
- Caple, R. B. (1985). Counseling and the self-organization paradigm, *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 46, 173-178.
- Capra, Fritjof (1996). *The web of life: A new scientific understanding of living systems*. New York: Doubleday.
- Capra, Fritjof (2002). *The hidden connections: A science for sustainable living*. New York: Anchor.
- Connors, J. & Caple, R. (2005). A review of group systems theory. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 30, 93-110.
- Connors, J. (2006). *Understanding Relationships and Groups through Interpersonal Systems Theory*. Systems Theory Press Website.
- Conyne, R. K. & Cook, E. P. (2004). *Ecological counseling: An innovative approach to conceptualizing person-environment interaction*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Durkin, J. E. (Ed.) (1981). *Living groups: Group psychotherapy and general system theory*. NY: Brunner/Mazel.
- Glenn, David (2003). The debriefing debate: One popular therapy is called into question, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50, 16-24.
- Koss, Mary & Burkhart, Barry (1989). A conceptual analysis of rape victimization: Long-term effects and implications for treatment. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 13, 27-40.
- Rothschild, Babette (2000). *The body remembers: The psychophysiology of trauma and trauma treatment*. New York: WW Norton.
- Selye, Hans (1978). *The stress of life* (2nd edition). McGraw-Hill.
- Senge, Peter (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization*. New York: Currency Doubleday.
- Tuckey, Michelle R. (2007). Issues in the debriefing debate for the emergency services: Moving research outcomes forward, *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 14, 106-116.
- Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J., & Fisch, R. (1974). *Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution*. New York: WW Norton.