

THE ANATOMY OF A TRAUMA

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Introduction:

What Freud started in 1900 took almost a century, but by the end of the Twentieth Century almost everyone knew that childhood traumas meant adult difficulties. No one doubts that serious sexual abuse has its counterpart in adult sexual problems; nor does anyone wonder if children who are greatly physically abused turn out to have difficulties with violence when they are adults. The Anatomy of a Trauma provides a model of pursuit of those terrible times while also, by its very nature, gives an avenue for resolution. This is a sequential pattern, meaning that one pursues questions according to the steps

A. The original situation.

Questions are phrased to the client in order to get a full description of what actually happened when the scarring event occurred. While proceeding carefully, it is important to have the person tell where (in or out of a building), at what age, the presence of others, and the best description available in regard to sounds, sights, smells, and sensations. It does need to be understood that the original situation is lost in history and no one can exactly re-construct it.

B. The perception of the child.

While absolute truth is unavailable, it is therapeutically critical to honor the client's perception. When parents are involved in the trauma, children invariably place the parents in some kind of all-knowing figure. Adults know that to be a false conception; still, the perception needs to be accepted though the therapist may say "and you - at that time - saw your parents as godlike figures. Is that right?" In other words, it is important to make the person become aware that their perception was colored by being a child. (see also: Complexity and Modularity)

C. Catastrophic fantasy.

Dependent children fear abandonment, helplessness, and death. They have great fears of violence and may exaggerate, in their minds, an incident -- though it may well be as horrible as stated. Still, it is important to ask an individual "What was your catastrophic fantasy?" On the basis of that fantasy, the person will make survival plans that include various psychological defense mechanisms. For example, a sexually abused child may turn off all bodily sensations in order to endure.

D. The burying of a real need, want or wish

A need, want or wish is buried. Following sequentially through this pattern, a person talking about their trauma is asked: "And what want, need or wish did you bury?" People then tell of what they gave up. The long list of natural childlike experiences is then admitted. One may give up childhood itself and act grown-up; another may give up love; another hope for being somebody. They may give up the thought of receiving true nurture. The list is heartrending.

E. The blocking of the original emotion

The original emotion is blocked. In the midst of the trauma the person invariably is scared to feel certain emotions - perhaps, ever again. The counselor asks questions about the six feelings, such as "And were you able to express your anger?" It becomes apparent that a feeling went underground and has festered in the unconscious. The person loses options in behavior, thinking, feeling, and willing at that moment.

F. The defense of childlike thinking

Childlike thinking pervades. In this module of the mind a person continues to think like a child. If, for example, a person has a major trauma at the age of four, it is likely that there will be a continuation of four year old thinking in the personality. This may mean a tendency to exaggerate, a graphic imagination about good and evil, and a magical sense of cause and effect. The counselor must quietly and persistently pursue what childlike decisions still affect grownup behavior.

G. The establishment of body armor

When a person gets into this old pocket of trauma, their body will constrict in a predictable manner. Breathing will be greatly affected, as will certain muscles throughout the body. The counselor notes these in an antiseptic manner such as: "So when you are under the influence of this trauma, your breathing becomes shallow and you tighten which muscles in your body?"

H. Various living patterns are established.

Problems do not occur in isolation. There is an ecology to the mental framework. This means that a person will establish, on the basis of the trauma, views about men and women, friends and family, work and play, joy and containment, creativity and passivity, and a host of other matters. A person may be asked: "And how do you think this trauma affects you in other areas of your life?" The counselor may then ask about some of the areas mentioned, such as, "Does this affect your view of men?"

Four illustrations:

Illustration 1

While supposedly watching his ten month old brother, five year old Bill got engaged in playing in a different room. The baby crawled near the fire with his 'blankie', caught on fire, and - in his panic - fell into the fireplace. Bill was oblivious. When his mother came home from the market, she discovered her baby's death, and, to cover her own culpability at leaving a five year old to take care of an infant, turned ferociously on Bill. Use your imagination and go through the above eight steps in order to gain an understanding of the Anatomy of a Trauma.

Illustration 2

Five year old Mary was playing at her grandmother's house in the basement. Her grandfather came down and played with her sexually. He told her that he would kill her mother and father if she ever told anyone. What aspects of the trauma can you figure out for this case?

Illustration 3

Four year old Jim was in a car wreck with his parents. His father was killed, his mother maimed, his sister killed, and he escaped with only minor scratches. Underneath in his mind, he thought that his anger at his father had caused the wreck and he began a lifelong courtship with guilt.

Illustration 4

Melanie's father would get drunk and beat her mother and brother. Melanie would hide under the kitchen table and become invisible. She learned to never show any feelings, make sounds, be visible with actions, or give an opinion. How do you think this set of traumas affected Melanie when she grew up? If you slowly asked her the eight Anatomy of a Trauma questions, do you think that would help her?

Questioning in a soft mode.

Professionals or friends who employ the Anatomy of a Trauma must know that there is a lot of pain involved here. Therefore, please ask questions in a soft manner. A person who shares with you is probably doing this for the first time and needs to be honored by care and confidentiality. While it is contra-indicated to be rescuing or too solicitous, it is very much indicated to be caring and tender. Remember that you are dealing with a child still active in the grown-up's personality.

Hints toward resolution.

One important idea is to use juxtaposition. In other words, occasionally say something like this: "I hear that you thought like that back then; is that the way you think now?" When you go over the list of the Anatomy of a Trauma, it is important to give the person permission to feel what was lost years ago. Since we now live in an age of information, it is good homework to write full explanations of each step on the Anatomy of a Trauma. Further, it may be necessary to express the blocked emotion in powerful ways in order to release the trauma.