HEALING FROM TRAUMA 
BY FOCUSING ON THE BODY

By Dr. Ilene Naomi Rusk

STRESS is an unavoidable part of life. Our plans hit roadblocks, our circumstances change constantly, we have interpersonal conflicts, we lose loved ones and we get hurt. Stress can take a toll on our bodies and minds. But when stress reaches a high level and is experienced as trauma, it can wreck havoc, disrupting our relationships, our health, our sleep, our sense of self and our professional lives.

Leading researchers in the field of trauma research recognize that trauma and stress are stored in the body and not just in the brain. The body is always sending sensory and perceptual messages to the brain, and it’s important to pay attention to those cues.

WHEN STRESS MANIFESTS AS TRAUMA

Trauma is most commonly thought of as a response to acute stressors like war and natural disasters, or chronic stressors like emotional or physical abuse, or single episode traumas such as a car accident. These stressful events or prolonged stressful circumstances can overwhelm our capacity for healthy coping and test our resilience. Almost any experience can cause trauma to develop when a person’s unique ability to cope is exceeded. When our capacity for dealing with stress falters and we feel helpless in the presence of a stressor, we may move into a more extreme response called trauma.

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This year of COVID 19 has been unlike any other, and continues to impact all of us in different ways. At Sharp Again Naturally (SAN), we have been regularly sharing timely information and the latest research articles via email and social media to support those of you at home. These emails have included ideas and suggestions for keeping yourselves actively engaged, both physically and mentally, and caring as well as possible for loved ones with dementia.

With so many people experiencing anxiety, it is a good time to be talking about Emotional Trauma, the subject of this newsletter. There is a continuum of stress, with good, motivating stress at one end and profound trauma such as PTSD on the other. This year, with COVID, job loss, food insecurity, weather-related disasters and other life stressors, many people are traumatized. Trauma can stay within the body and the brain, and if not treated, can lead to memory issues and ultimately, dementia.

Our lead article is by Dr. Ilene Naomi Rusk, a neuropsychologist who is Director of the Healthy Brain Program at the Brain & Behavior Clinic in Boulder, CO. She talks about how trauma resides in the body and how it can be treated. Our Q&A is by Mona Cattan, a board-certified health and wellness coach and trauma counselor. She answers questions about emotional trauma to help us understand what it is and when it is time to seek help.

As many of you know, SAN shifted to a virtual fundraiser in July when it became apparent that no events could take place in person. While we are very grateful to everyone who donated, we came up short in our fundraising goal. As we enter the last few weeks of the year, we are asking for your support now to help Sharp Again Naturally continue to grow and expand our programs when people need us more than ever. Any amount is greatly appreciated. To make a donation, go to sharpagain.org/donate or send a check to SAN, PO Box 713, Larchmont, NY 10538. If you want to watch/re-watch the fundraiser event featuring examples of the good work we continue to do, thanks to you, click here.

Stay safe and well, and please reach out to us if you need support for yourself or a loved one. Call us at 914-281-1404 or email info@sharpagain.org.

Lisa Feiner  
Board Chair, Sharp Again Naturally

SHARPERMIND™ SMALL GROUP PROGRAM

Since its founding, SAN has been a valued source of cutting-edge information on the causes of dementia and critical lifestyle changes we can make to stay mentally sharp throughout our lives. We also recognize that people often need help in bridging the gap between knowing what to do and actually making changes to lifelong habits and behaviors.

This fall, SAN launched an exciting online group program that provides support for individuals who want to improve their memory and brain health by making important and specific lifestyle changes. The SharperMind™ Small Group Program is a safe and affordable series of virtual group coaching sessions with a Certified Health Coach. Participants focus on topics such as nutrition, sleep, and exercise, and ask questions and share experiences in a supportive environment. Health coaches guide participants in setting actionable and achievable personal goals, and help them stay on-track throughout the program.

Feedback from participants has been extremely positive. One participant says, “I finally feel as if my memory and focus are clearer.” New groups are forming early next year. For more info: sharperminds@sharpagain.org or click here.
Trauma can be experienced emotionally, cognitively, and physically.

Following a traumatic episode, a racing pulse, nausea, chronic pain, and muscle tightness can persist or reappear suddenly at inappropriate times long after the environmental trigger for a “flight or fight” response is gone. Research shows that trauma affects our whole body—disrupting our immune, endocrine, and muscle systems, and setting the stage for conditions such as autoimmune diseases.

When we have unresolved traumas, emotions can swing rapidly and become intense and overwhelming. Feeling afraid, angry, or out of control when traumatized, we may withdraw, cutting off those closest to us. When we are emotionally distressed our cognition is impaired and this may negatively affect memory or attention.

Our thinking may be affected by a persistent “brain fog” or problems with focus and attention, and we may develop cognitive challenges. We might become easily distracted, struggle to concentrate on tasks that once interested us, and have difficulty remembering things. We might even forget the events surrounding the trauma, as these memories become inaccessible to our consciousness. Alternatively, when the trauma stays with us, severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms can arise including aggressive emotional outbursts, sleep disruption, and self-destructive behaviors.

The emotional and cognitive effects of trauma are well known and widely discussed in the media in connection with veterans returning from combat. However, we often neglect to acknowledge and properly address the toll of less severe traumas on our bodies and minds. For example, children who are repeatedly humiliated or criticized, or who are raised with stress and a feeling of helplessness, can experience trauma. Whether mild or pervasive, unresolved trauma is stored in the body and in the brain.

Although the traumatic event may be long over, someone who is traumatized may continue to experience memories of it, along with a physiological stress response. Our brains and bodies get amped up, ready to respond to the trauma-inducing stressor, and the body cannot return to equilibrium. Without help, the body cannot complete the response needed to escape from, fight against, or otherwise resolve the trauma. Traumatic memories might “loop” as cognitive patterns and affect the neurologic circuitry of the brain.

HEALING FROM TRAUMA

Many of us are familiar with therapies in which patients explore childhood experiences and talk extensively with a therapist, seeking the situational roots of their traumas and any emotional or cognitive symptoms they may be experiencing.

Leading trauma experts suggest that another way of dealing with unresolved traumas may be to focus on the physiological experience—delving deep into what they describe as the “traumatic energy” stored in our bodies. Contemporary trauma experts Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk and Dr. Peter Levine have developed highly effective therapeutic approaches to trauma resolution that address the physiological roots of our stress response.
To understand how the key to trauma recovery may lie in “letting our bodies speak,” we first need to understand our physiological response to stress. How do wild animals deal with threats? Animals facing serious, life-threatening danger have three instinctive defense systems for dealing with the threat:

- They can develop sudden tonic immobility where muscles go limp and they are frozen and unable to move.
- They can go into “fight or flight” mode. The sympathetic nervous system pumps out many neurochemicals or hormones readying the animal to attack or flee.
- They can seek social engagement to defuse tension and reduce the threat. Animals are wired to seek safety in numbers and find comfort with others. This support-seeking behavior only occurs in mammals.

Humans share these similar survival instincts. When confronted with overwhelming or life-endangering stress, we respond like threatened animals—and we cannot talk or reason ourselves out of these instinctual, physiological, and largely unconscious responses.
BODY-FOCUSED TRAUMA RECOVERY

Dr. Peter Levine developed Somatic Experiencing (SE) to help patients tap into the body’s natural release and reset mechanisms. Somatic or body-focused approaches to trauma recovery acknowledge the mind-body connection. These approaches are designed to help us recruit the body to work with the brain to release and then integrate mental and sensory memories from the past. Somatic therapies help trauma sufferers pay attention to and observe physical sensations as a means of accessing and releasing stored energy from unresolved trauma.

The Somatic Experiencing method is based on the natural mechanisms wild animals use to restore their physiological equilibrium after stressful events. Animals have been observed to shake their bodies involuntarily to release stress chemicals and excess energy. Humans sometimes find themselves shaking uncontrollably after stress, but in modern society, we’ve been conditioned to suppress this natural stress response. We may also be distracted from allowing ourselves to ‘shake off’ trauma when we’re forced to deal with the immediate aftermath of traumatic experiences. Somatic-based therapy practitioners use techniques that allow clients to slowly and safely release the stuck energies that are held in their bodies and are negatively affecting their lives.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

There are professionals who specialize in the techniques described in this article. In addition, a gentle restorative yoga class also provides the opportunity to connect to the body and listen to what it has to say.

Dr. Levine uses the imagery of a slinky to help clients visualize the effects of Somatic Experiencing. Trauma causes the slinky to clamp down, storing tremendous unreleased energy. Through body-aware psychotherapies, clients can allow the energy to release little by little in a controlled environment: crying, shaking, or other modes of gradual and gentle release.

Without addressing these locked-down energies, trauma can be continually re-experienced through physical sensations and emotions that arise even without conscious awareness or direct memories of the trauma.

Acknowledging that trauma is actually “stored” in the body empowers individuals to access professional treatment in the same way they would for any physical symptom or injury that needs time and attention to heal. Remember that when we take care of past traumas, we’re also taking care of our brain health.

Dr. Ilene Naomi Rusk is a neuropsychologist and a co-founder of the Brain and Behavior Clinic in Boulder, CO. She has trained in a functional medicine approach to address root causes of cognitive decline in Alzheimer’s Disease with Dr. Dale Bredesen. Dr. Rusk’s work focuses on blending personalized integrative healthcare and psychological wellness within a scientist-practitioner model.
Q&A: EMOTIONAL TRAUMA

By Mona E. Cattan, MSSW, LCSW, NBC-HWC, CCM

What is trauma?

Trauma can be defined as witnessing or experiencing something horrific, where you are afraid that you or someone else is at risk of injury or death. In the long-term, trauma can impact physical, emotional and mental health. Trauma may include such varied experiences as the destruction of prized possessions, loss of freedoms or lack of safety or security. Most frequently, traumatic experiences are connected to abuse, abandonment or neglect, and may be physical or emotional in nature.

How is emotional trauma different from trauma?

Emotional trauma refers specifically to damage to the mind and emotions that occurs as a result of one or more distressing events or experiences. Emotional trauma is often the result of overwhelming levels of stress that exceed an individual’s ability to cope. It may result from a single distressing experience or from recurring experiences and often leads to serious, long-term negative consequences.

What are Adverse Childhood Experiences?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE’s) are traumatic experiences that happen when we are young and can have a profound impact on our memory, health and well-being. Those who have experienced ACE’s often have impaired immune systems where the body’s ability to fight disease and infection is compromised. ACE’s also affect the structural and functional development of the brain’s neural networks, and these changes can impact memory in middle age and lead to dementia later in life. Additionally, long term effects include speeded up processes of aging and disease.

How is emotional trauma related to memory loss?

Stress experienced from a traumatic event or series of events causes an increase in levels of adrenaline and cortisol, two stress hormones tied to survival. Chronically high levels of stress, especially combined with conditions that threaten our physical and psychological well-being (toxic stress), result in sustained and elevated stress hormones. This cortisol “bath” often leads to adrenal fatigue, insomnia or hypersomnia, learning difficulties, poor memory and difficulty making decisions.

Some people experience prolonged periods of arousal or agitation followed by mental, emotional and/or physical exhaustion and burnout. During these periods, memory can falter and it can become difficult to perform even simple tasks. Trauma changes the brain and its chemistry, and these changes can be passed on to the next generation, during pregnancy and in infancy.

How do I know if I’ve experienced something traumatic?

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The severity of symptoms in response to trauma depends on the individual, the type of trauma, and other factors. If an individual has experienced trauma, they may display a variety of symptoms and behaviors. (Including but not limited to)

1. Intrusive and recurring thoughts or memories — can’t push it out of mind for very long
2. Flashbacks — can range from brief distractions, loss of awareness, feeling disoriented
3. Detachment from self and others — inability to express emotions, lack of empathy or avoiding or unable to form connections on an emotional level
4. Recurrent nightmares or night terrors
5. Re-experiencing or the sense of reliving past event(s) including body sensations
6. Difficultly integrating and/or making sense of what has happened
7. Struggling to cope
8. Intense feelings of anger, sadness, fear — inappropriate, incongruent or disproportionate to current events
9. Anxiety/panic disorders and/or various mood disorders/depression especially if they don’t respond well to medications or traditional talk therapies
10. Hyper vigilance, i.e. difficulty or inability to relax or let down your guard
11. Feeling insecure, never safe, inability to trust
12. Difficultly establishing or maintaining healthy, loving, safe and respectful relationships, including low self-esteem, lack of self-worth and poor boundaries

Q Why are some people more likely to develop PTSD?
A We know that people react differently to similar traumatic events. It may be related to objective factors such as the age of the individual when they experienced the event, whether they experienced a single or multiple events, the type of event, and whether or not they had a support system to help them recover from the experience.

Some individuals may be more emotionally resilient in coping with traumatic experiences. They may have a greater ability to actively seek help. In other words, not all people who experience a potentially traumatic event will become psychologically or emotionally impacted nor at the same level even if experiencing the same event.

It is possible for some people to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after being exposed to a single major traumatic event. The more events, the more likely that PTSD will develop.

Q How do I know if I need help?
A If you are experiencing any of the symptoms AND they are causing significant distress or problems in your ability to function at home, school, or work, and especially if you are having difficulty in relationships, talk to a mental health specialist, particularly a trauma informed clinician.

Q What kinds of help can I get if I think I’ve experienced emotional trauma?
A A mental health specialist can work with you to understand your history and experiences, evaluate your symptoms, and develop a treatment plan that may include medications and a combination of trauma therapy approaches. While medications can change body chemistry, trauma therapy can change the neural pathways in the brain, creating new patterns of beliefs, thoughts, emotions and behaviors. A therapy continued on page 8 . . .
known as EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing) uses a patient's rapid eye movements to dampen the power of emotionally charged memories of past traumatic events. In a separate article, Dr. Ilene Naomi Rusk discusses another innovative approach to trauma therapy called Somatic Experiencing, which focuses on releasing the traumatic energy that is stored in the body. The encouraging news is that, with the therapeutic options now available, recovery from trauma is possible.

**Q** Is there anything else I can do that might help me recover from trauma?

**A** Understand that you were victimized—things happened to you, and these things have had a significant impact on you. At the same time, it’s important to decide that you will not allow these past events to control you any longer, and to find help and support. Be aware of your own negative self-talk and try to be kind to yourself.

Educate yourself on trauma, so that once you find the support and treatment that’s right for you, you can become an active participant.

Be open to considering medications your therapist may recommend, especially initially, because these can help stabilize your symptoms and give you a stronger foundation to build on. If a medication isn’t working for you, let your doctor know, and be careful not to discontinue medications without consulting your doctor or pharmacist.

Lastly, remember the important basics: get restorative sleep, maintain a healthy diet, spend time in nature, and stay physically active in ways that you enjoy.

Mona Cattan is a Health & Wellness coach as well as an experienced therapist who has worked with individuals, families and groups with a diverse range of mental/behavioral issues including anxiety, depression, trauma, addictions, codependency and eating disorders. She has counseled active and retired members of the military and their dependents. Mona resides in Louisville, KY where she has a private virtual practice.