

The Post-Traumatic Gazette No. 34

© 2000, Patience H. C. Mason Feel free to copy and distribute as long as you keep this copyright notice

When Holidays Hurt by Patience Mason

Many trauma survivors have a hard time with holidays. There's often a lot of emotional investment in having everyone participate in fun, excitement, crowds of family, noise, etc. Such expectations can create problems for trauma survivors who may be triggered by crowds, family, or the anniversary of a trauma. Christmas isn't the same after your child is killed by a terrorist bomb on Flight 103 over Lockerbie. Thanksgiving isn't the same after you fight off a Chinese attack on Yudam-ni near the Chosin Reservoir. Succoth isn't the same after the Nazis kill your fellow Jews in the town square to prove the superiority of the aryan race (more proof, if any were needed, that white supremacy is a myth.)

Rape, battery, murder, and accidents (auto to industrial) happen on holidays. Earthquakes, fires, and floods do, too.

Such experiences change the meaning of holidays. They are now an anniversary of a trauma rather than something to celebrate. Innocence is lost. You can't get it back, but you can reduce the amount of hurt holidays cause.

Partners of traumatized people also struggle with holidays, with wanting to celebrate in the normal way and not understanding why the trauma survivor can't. "Can't you just be normal for one day?" from No. 22 might help.

Education on PTSD helps reduce the pain and the expectations, but there are other things survivors and family members can do to reduce the hurt or helplessness they may be feeling.

I have several suggestions for healing around the holidays:

1. Change your focus:

Focus on what you do have, instead

of what you do not. Is your glass half empty or half full? Is someone you love alive? Or do you only see that he or she has problems and isn't able to participate in the festivities? Can you focus on being together despite problems, or do you focus on what you lack? Although it is natural to want to provide loved ones with stuff, acceptance and attention are the greatest gifts of all. (Notice the order of the words. Critical attention is no gift.)

As a survivor, are you angry at yourself for not being able to do the things other people do without a thought? Perhaps today you can be proud that you made it and are working at recovery. If you are not working on recovery, start now. That is a gift beyond price to your family and friends.

You can make holidays better by focusing on what they really mean. Does Christmas really mean toys, parties, gifts turkey, pie, lights and noise, or is it the celebration of the birth of a homeless child whose parent-hood was obscure and who almost immediately became a refugee? How traumatic do you think it might be to give birth to your first child in a stable or to have actual angels popping in? To have to flee to save your child's life within weeks of giving birth? To feel responsible for the slaughter of the innocents? It's another family of trauma survivors! For me Christmas is a celebration of birth and life and surviving trauma. Maybe you can look at it that way, too.

This works with other holidays. Thanksgiving commemorates the Native Americans rescuing the Pilgrims from starvation. Easter celebrates a traumatic death. Hannukah commemorates a miracle in the midst

of the trauma of war. The Fourth of July commemorates the beginning of a traumatic struggle. Memorial Day and Veterans Day commemorate traumatic deaths. Halloween commemorated all the dead.

I can't say what the meaning of a holiday may be for you, but for me looking at them as celebrating life after trauma helps me to withdraw myself from the crass commercialism and see them in a new, more healing light.

2. Think about what you want out of the holidays. I don't want to go to parties where drunken people tell my combat vet husband he's not patriotic enough, which has happened. I don't want to make cookies that I'll eat too many of. I do want to see my friends and give them ingenious presents that will make them laugh or touch their hearts. I do want to see my family. I want to have a turkey dinner and leftovers. I want to sing carols and sit in a darkened room with only the tree lights on. I want to show people I love that I love them. I want to decorate. I want to be peaceful.

I used to want to make the holidays "perfect," but today I want them to be fun. When I think back on our holidays, I remember the tree we got on Christmas Eve when we were really broke. Bob drilled holes and added branches because it had gaping holes in it. I also remember the year my oven had no thermostat and when I checked it the temperature was either 500 degrees or it had gone out. It was the best turkey I ever cooked! The ones when the oven worked perfectly, I can't even remember.

3. Do what you enjoy. If you like parties, you go. If you like walking in the moonlit snow, do that. Do you

like to make presents or buy them? Do you like eating with your family and friends? Then do that. Do you like feeding the homeless? Do that. Don't use guilt or self-righteousness to manipulate other people into doing what you like.

When someone is totally focused on having the "right" kind of holiday, manipulating others into participating may seem ok, since it is for their own good. Remember, manipulation is not good for trauma survivors. They need to regain a sense of effectiveness and control in their own lives. Manipulation can delay that.

You might also ask yourself a few questions about what you actually enjoy. Be alert for the words "should" or "ought to," which usually indicate that you are doing things you don't really like. Doing less of your shoulds will help.

You might think "If I really wanted to do that, I would be doing it already" or "I must like it, if I'm doing it." In my experience that is not accurate. There are many reasons why people with PTSD or their family members may do things they hate, or may not do things they want to do. Most of these are based on wanting to help and protect each other.

Take your time about making changes and talk them over. Some reasons for the things we do are not conscious. Questioning yourself and talking it over may help you see reasons you were not aware of before. If something is a perennial bone of contention, it may be an unconscious safety issue. Perhaps Christmas lights are drawing attention to where people sleep, which is not safe to the trauma survivor, but he or she may not realize it. Perhaps giving you your heart's desire sets you up to be disappointed, so your trauma survivor thinks you'll be tougher if you don't get it. Perhaps awareness will help them see other ways to protect you or even that they don't have to.

4. Survivors and family mem-

bers can help themselves through holidays by staying with recovery, reaching out for help, and helping others. This is not a time to be skipping therapy or meetings. Many therapists remain home for the holidays because they know this is a particularly hard time for trauma survivors and their families. Having a phone list of other survivors or 12 step group members is useful. When times are tough, talk about it with someone who can understand. Stay in touch.

5. Change your expectations. Expecting other people to be perfect, to meet your needs, to fulfill your wishes, puts you at their mercy. It is far better to expect them to be human and to expect yourself to be human, too. That means you won't please everyone, but you can make efforts that are in line with your own values and capacities. If you can't go to a crowded Christmas Pageant, maybe you can ask your kid to play his part for you. If your spouse can't go, and you can, go. To questions, simply say "He/she couldn't make it. Thanks for asking." Explanations of PTSD are not required. Pushy people get a cold, "I beg your pardon!"

6. Give yourself credit. Many trauma survivors are so bound up in wanting to be recovered from the trauma, that they do not give themselves credit for surviving and for coming as far as they have in recovery, even if it is only an inch. Recovery is hard. Be proud. Family members can be proud, too. We pay a price for living with PTSD. Even if we feel it is worth the pain, we can give ourselves credit, too.

7. Give yourself gifts: these can range from inner child gifts (toys, etc.) to valuable gifts (something you think you can't afford or don't deserve but always wanted) to stopping an addiction. The gift may be an award for that inner 18 year old who came back from Vietnam and was ignored. Give him a plaque that says "Thanks and welcome home." The message of giving yourself gifts is you are worth it. Comfort

gifts include safe scent candles, bubble bath, nice exercise clothes, new sheets and towels, soft pajamas, a nightgown, or nightshirt. For the shopaholic, however, give yourself sanity about money.

8. Give of yourself to something you value: Whether it is time from the workaholic to the family, or helping the homeless, Habitat for Humanity, your church, the scouts, or other trauma survivors, altruism is empowering and healing. If all you can do is give one can of tuna to a food drive, do it. Someone needs that tuna and the action will help you overcome that helpless, hopeless feeling that can paralyze us.

9. Create healing traditions: There are many kinds of trauma, and many different parts of us that need to heal. If your trauma happened in the family and can't be healed because they don't acknowledge it, perhaps you can create a new family of choice of other recovering trauma survivors and their families. Maybe you need to acknowledge people who died. Talking to them is a healing action you can take. So what if it sounds silly. Who will know?

Perhaps you can plant a tree in memory of someone, or in honor of all those who have survived. Maybe you can give a book on healing trauma to the local library, create a healing ceremony for trauma survivors in your community, or just privately celebrate your recovery or mourn your losses. It is okay to be sad.

Every action you take on your own behalf will empower you in your recovery. It is really a personal choice. Others may not want to participate, but it is important to do it anyhow, for yourself. You deserve to recover, and one day at a time, one small step at a time, you can.

Healing Holidays!

Buy yourself a good book

I am listing ones I enjoyed or that look helpful. Take what you like and leave the rest.

Growing Beyond Survival: A Self-Help Toolkit for Managing Traumatic Stress Elizabeth Vermilyea, see next 2 pages.

Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art: Drawing from the Center, Barry M Cohen, Mary-Michola Barnes and Anita B. Rankin, art heals, no "talent" needed.

The Way of the Journal, by Kathleen Adams, journaling for trauma survivors.

All three from The Sidran Press, 200 E Joppa Rd, Suite 207, Baltimore, MD, 21286, www.sidran.org, 410-825-8888.

Life After Trauma, a workbook by Dena Rosenbloom, and Mary Beth Williams, The Guilford Press, New York, 1999, ISBN1-57230-239-9, \$17.95, healing suggestions for selfcare and exercises in examining trauma affected thinking. Work on increasing safety and happiness in the present.

New Harbinger

Aphrodite Matsakis' *I Can't Get Over It, Trust After Trauma, Survivor Guilt, PTSD: A Complete Treatment Guide and When the Bough Breaks*

Children Changed by Trauma, Debra Whiting Alexander

Carol Staudacher's *Men and Grief, Beyond Grief, and Grief's Courageous Journey*

New Harbinger also publishes a series of workbooks including *Healing the Trauma of Abuse: A Women's Workbook*, *Making Hope Happen*, *The Worry Control Workbook*, ones on shame, forgiveness, relaxation and many other topics of interest to trauma survivors. 1-800-748-6273

Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem Making by John Fox, Jeremy P Tarcher/Putnam, New York, 1997, \$16.95. One of my tools is poetry.

The Sexual Healing Journey, Wendy Maltz, Harper Perennial, 1992. I

got this through bookfinder.com, a great site for finding obscure books. If you don't have a computer, you can go online at the public library.

Leaping Upon the Mountains: Men Proclaiming Victory over Sexual Child Abuse, Mike Lew, Small Wonder Books, P O Box 1146, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130, <http://www.wabington.com/smallwonder/index.html>, \$19.95 plus \$4.00 shipping. His other book, *Victims No Longer*, Harper & Row, 1990, is hard to find but worth the effort.

Half the House, Richard Hoffman, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1995, an excellent, moving memoir about sexual abuse by a coach and the process of recovery.

The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook, Genn R. Schiraldi, Lowell House, \$18.95 lots of good information on trauma and healing, although I notice he doesn't know about my book or the Gazette which is disappointing.

Recovering From the War, Patience Mason, Patience Press, 1998, \$19.95. I hear a lot of good feedback on this book and am proud to have written it. *Also Why Is Daddy Like He Is?* and *Why Is Mommy Like She Is?* (\$5.00 each).

Grief Denied: A Vietnam Widow's Story, (see p. 6 for ordering information and review of this wonderful book.)

Baptism: A Vietnam Memoir, Larry Gwin, Ivy Books, 1999. War and its consequences, powerfully written by a 1st Cav grunt officer (there when Bob was).

Colder Than Hell: A Marine Rifle Company at Chosin Reservoir, Joseph R. Owen, Ivy Books, 1995, another powerful and moving book about a little known war.

The Road to Auschwitz, Heidi

Fried, University of Nebraska Press, 1990. Life in the ghetto, Auschwitz, and liberation. Quietly powerful book by a woman who spent her teen years under the threat of annihilation and is now a therapist.

The Narrow Bridge: Beyond the Holocaust, Issac Neuman, University of Illinois Press, 2000. The moving and fascinating story of a religious Jew surviving the Nazis to become a rabbi.

From Melos to My Lai: War and Survival, Lawrence A Tritle, Routledge, 2000. Vietnam vet and classics scholar writes about the costs of war to the ancient Greeks and 20th century soldiers!

Vietnam Veterans' Homecoming: Crossing the Line, Carey Spearman, Truman Publishing, Kansas City, MO, 2000, ISBN-0-9663393-5-5, 17.95. Book of moving meditations on war and recovery.

Prisoners of Hate: The Cognitive Basis of Anger, Hostility, and Violence, Aaron Beck, M. D., HarperCollins, 1999. The man who noticed cognitive distortions, and developed cognitive therapy, which is used often with PTSD, talks about how distorted perceptions lead to violence. One of my big interests.

Precious Solitude, Ruth Fischel, Adams Media Corporation, 1999. Finding time for yourself to heal.

Some of these are how-to recovery books, some are more philosophical or theoretical and some are personal stories. I find them all helpful.

Growing Beyond Survival: A Self-Help Toolkit for Managing Traumatic Stress by Elizabeth Vermilyea, MA,

The Sidran Press, 200 E Joppa Rd, Suite 207, Baltimore, MD, 21286, www.sidran.org, 410-825-8888, ISBN 1-886968-09-8, \$24.95.

This book is designed to give survivors a series of tools to help them manage traumatic stress symptoms and responses. Part of its value is that it offers a variety of choices and therefore empowers the survivor to learn what works and to practice incorporating effective strategies into his or her life. We can't erase trauma, but we can learn to deal effectively with the problems it may cause, and to substitute more effective tools for the ones we may have been using to survive. Here is a sample from pages 30-32, reprinted with permission-P.M.:

Tool: Grounding

Goals: to increase awareness in the here and now; to facilitate clear reality contact; to reduce posttraumatic experiences (i.e., flashbacks, hypervigilance, and intrusive recollections) and dissociative experiences (i.e., spontaneous trance, depersonalization, time loss, and uncontrolled switching).

Ideas:

1. Present focused awareness is important for combating the avoidance that occurs through dissociation (spontaneous trance, uncontrolled switching, time loss, and depersonalization) and traumatic stress adaptations (numbing, avoidance, flashbacks, nightmares, and panic). If you are paying attention to the here and now, then you are less likely to be lost in the past with no awareness of present-day resources. In addition, you are also less likely to be caught up in fearful thoughts about the future. In the past, dissociation may have been the only defense against trauma; leaving the body was a helpful skill back then. It was too painful and/or dangerous for you to focus on experiences as they happened. In the present, however, shutting thoughts or feelings out or leaving your body recreates the old fears and might make you feel just like you did as a child [or a young kid in combat—Ed.]. Present focused awareness is your defense against becoming trapped in the hopeless and helpless feelings of the past.

2. Grounding is the process of being present and connected in the here and now. Stress responses can numb people so they don't experience the terror and the horror of trauma in the moment. Dissociation and numbing continue to reduce present awareness in an attempt to protect against overwhelming traumatic events and experiences. However, over time, the process of dissociation and numbing may fail or may interfere with everyday life. Survivors become aware of stress responses such as flashbacks. Dissociation and numbing were wartime survival techniques, and using wartime strategies during peacetime is not effective. Dissociation may have helped you to manage the unmanageable, but as an adult in peacetime, you need life skills rather than survival skills. Just like war veterans with PTSD who struggle to cope with peacetime living, you need to learn how to manage intense, overwhelming experiences in more present focused ways.

B. had a traumatic childhood. He witnesses terrible fights between his parents and had to protect his brothers and sisters from his father. He was always afraid when he heard people yelling because to him it meant danger in his house. He used to "fade away" (trance out) whenever the yelling would start so that he wouldn't have to be scared. Now, as an adult, B. can't go anywhere that might expose him to yelling because he becomes terrified and "fades away" (trances out) almost automatically. B's inability to manage his reactions to yelling severely restricts his life because he can't be around his children when they yell, and he can't enjoy things like ball games because of the yelling. Sometimes he hears yelling in his head, and he can't stop himself from fading away. B's posttraumatic experiences (flashbacks) and wartime coping mechanisms (fading away) are interfering with his peacetime life.

B. can do several things to help himself. The first thing is to begin using grounding tools with self-talk. B. will need to practice the tools almost constantly in order to combat the automatic numbing and dissociation that takes over when he is triggered by the yelling.

The explanation of each tool is followed by worksheet(s) which give examples and practice on how to use the tools. The next page is the first of four worksheets on this tool.-P.M

Grounding Worksheet 1

Using your five senses

- Sight—open your eyes; look around; name present-day sights; connect with them (“this is my driver’s license,” etc.); realize that you’re an adult; look at how tall you are
- Sound—listen for present-day sounds and name them; let them bring you closer to the present; talk to yourself inside; say comforting things
- Taste—suck on a peppermint; chew gum; drink coffee; use tastes that are connected with being safe and being an adult; carry these things with you at all times
- Smell—use scented hand lotion, potpourri, a cotton ball soaked with perfume, or scented candles to remind you of the present, carry something with you that you can use anywhere
- Touch—hold a safe object; feel textures and let them bring you closer to the present; pet your cat or dog (or parrot!); connect with a loving presence in your life and let it help you remain in the present; carry a note or small object from someone you love.

Items to use for grounding yourself:

Sight	Sound	Smell	Taste	Touch
watch or clock	soothing music	scented candle	peppermint	lotion
photograph	nature sounds	potpourri	cinnamon	a stone
outdoors	familiar sounds	scented lotion	lemon	ice cube
driver’s license	your voice	essential oils	chewing gum	pets

List some of the things you can do to get grounded using your five senses.

Sight (Example)—When B. hears his children yelling he can look at them and tell himself, “These are my kids, and it’s natural for kids to yell; they are safe.”

Sound—B. can learn to listen to the noise to identify what kind of yelling he’s hearing. He can tell himself, “Those people are cheering. They are happy and excited. They are not in danger”

Taste—B. likes the taste of cinnamon gum. He carries it with himself all of the time and can focus on the taste of the gum to help him feel more grounded.

Smell—B.’s wife uses Snuggle fabric softener in the laundry. When he plays with his kids, the smell of their clothes helps keep him focused on the present.

Touch—B. keeps a smooth piece of hematite rock in his pocket. He holds it when he feels scared.

Elizabeth Vermilyea says, “what I have attempted to convey in this book: a way to think of what you want, a way to reduce the powers of your fears...to know yourself and grow...another purpose of this workbook is to help readers understand their feelings and to provide concrete tools to help them manage these feelings and the effects of traumatic stress more effectively.” (Preface, p vii) Highly Recommended -P.M

Grief Denied: A Vietnam Widow's Story

by Pauline Laurent, Catalyst For Change, PO Box 5158, Santa Rosa, CA 95402, \$14.95 plus \$3.50 shipping and handling

credit card orders 800-852-4890 or fax 707-838-2220, www.griefdenied.com

One of the traumatic stressors that is rarely discussed is losing a loved one in a war. We are able to see that being in battle is traumatic stress, that losing buddies is traumatic stress, even that working with the wounded or dead (nurses, doctors, medics and bodybaggers) is traumatic stress, but no one has paid attention to the traumatic stress of having a man in uniform walk up to your door and tell you that someone you love is never coming home.

Pauline Laurent takes us into the heart of that trauma in a very moving and healing book. She describes emotional numbing, workaholicism and the process of grief which she had to go through to heal herself. Part of the immediate value of this book to other survivors is that she talks about the tools she used to heal herself which included writing, therapy, recovering from an addiction, creating healing rituals, and sitting with painful feelings in a safe setting (for her on the floor in the bathroom with the door closed), among others. She mentions books that helped her and types of therapy. Watching her progress as I read the book reinforced my belief—of which this Gazette is evidence—that we never know what will heal us, that healing comes in stages, and that it takes a variety of strategies and or tools to heal.

The first five chapters of the book tell the story of Pauline and Howard's brief marriage, and Pauline's life until her capacity to suppress her grief began to break down. Chapter 5, The Descent Into Hell describes the process of losing a job that had defined her and becoming suicidal, and the turning point she finally reached. She identifies how addictions helped her cope when she had no idea that anything was wrong with her and how she got into a recovery program and finally into therapy.

Chapter 6 is called Opening the Box—Entering the Grief. Chapter 11 is called Recovery of Self, and starts with the words "During the third year of my grief [my italics]..." That's another reason why I like this book. It doesn't pretend that recovering from trauma is a quick or easy process. She is a good writer which means she doesn't tell the reader she was in pain. She shows the pain, and we feel it. She demonstrates how to live with, feel and grow through the pain. She also shows how she gradually reached out and found a community of support among Vietnam veterans and Sons and Daughters In Touch (for the children of people killed in Vietnam). Here's how she describes a workshop she went to near the end of the book:

Eugene Cash began the day with a poem about a son who had died in the war. I was crying immediately. By the end of the day, I realized the completion of my grief was not really the issue. In grieving, I had opened my heart and with an open heart, I was feeling more than I had ever felt before. Almost everything moved me to tears.

I watched others cry that day and realized I had a new relationship with grief. It didn't scare me anymore. I could witness it without wanting to run.

Now that's recovery! *Grief Denied* is an extraordinary and powerful book. I hope you will all read it!

Have you seen someone blown away? Stabbed? Beaten? Hit by a car? Raped? Tortured? This is the full text of my pamphlet for teenagers.

If you have seen someone killed or seriously injured by violence, or know someone who was hurt or killed, it can affect you without your realizing it. The person does not have to be close to you, although losing a friend or family member is more likely to affect you. If you yourself have been sexually abused or messed with sexually by a family member or person you trusted, no matter how gently, injured in an accident or deliberate act of violence or suddenly lost your family or community or lived through a natural disaster, it can also affect you. If any of these things has happened to you more than once the effects can be stronger. Most people do not know about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, so if they have any of the symptoms listed below they hide them or may try to numb them with drugs and alcohol because they feel crazy. These feelings and behaviors are not crazy. They are normal reactions to experiences that would upset anyone.

Three Big Ways That Violence Affects You:

1. Numbing and Avoidance: Many people become numb as a survivor skill so they can do whatever it takes to survive. It works. After the incident is over it's really hard for most people to get back the ability to feel. It is easier to stay numb than to feel the pain, but it can make you wonder about yourself. After you've seen a few friends blown away you may wonder if you are some kind of monster because you can't feel it anymore. You may find yourself doing things that are against the values you were raised with, especially if you had to do something that went against your upbringing to survive. You may lose interest in things you once loved to do. You may also lose the ability to feel good, to feel happy, to love. Violence seems normal. Isn't that how everyone lives? You may begin to believe that you're going to have a short life, so you might as well do what you want. You may avoid things that might make you feel anything. You may believe no one can understand you, like you are on the outside looking in at all these dumb people who haven't a clue. You may hate them. You may even forget what happened, evidence that you may have been through something that was too much for anyone. All of these reactions are normal, but after a time they

stop working. When the pain breaks through, you may turn to drugs, alcohol, sex, or even violence to get numb again.

2. Hyperalert: In order to survive in violent places, most people get hyper, another appropriate and effective survivor skill. You may have nerves, learn to sleep lightly, watch for danger everywhere all the time. Maybe you can tell when something bad is about to happen. You can read other peoples' moods and faces. While you are doing this, your school-work may go downhill because you cannot concentrate on school-work and remain hyperalert. You may also suddenly go from fine to a killing rage in about half a second, which can scare you and your family and friends. You may also get a physical reaction, an adrenaline rush or the shakes and nausea, for example, when you walk down a street or go into a house that looks like the one in which the violence happened. All this is normal.

3. Reexperiencing: Finally you may not be able to stop thinking about the violent event, dreaming about it, feeling like it is happening again (flashbacks), or hurting yourself or others the way you have been hurt (re-enacting). When a similar incident is on the news it brings up a lot of feelings. The anniversary of someone's death may really bother you. "Why aren't I over this?" you may think. Or you may find yourself getting into the same kind of dangerous situation, time after time, as if you were trying to make it come out right for once. These are also appropriate reactions to your experiences, because they are messages from your inner self telling you that you need help in dealing with what you have been through. "Respect yourself and your experiences," is the message. "Don't discount what you have been through."

Why Do I Feel Like This?

Because you are a human being. If the violence around you is giving you nerves, that's ok. It is normal to have nerves. Your nerves are supposed to tell you when you are in danger. Feeling so numb you feel like you are already dead is normal too. Sometimes people alternate feeling all nerves and totally dead. That's normal too. Each person reacts differently to things. You have a right to feel however you feel. It is normal

to be affected by violence. You are having a Post-Traumatic Stress Reaction. If you have enough of the symptoms discussed above, you may have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Can You Get Help?

The most important help you can get yourself is to talk about the incident with a qualified professional or someone you trust, someone who will listen and not tell you to get over it or forget it. If you bottle up the pain, you'll keep it with you forever, and it will affect you.

Reactions that were effective right after the trauma can become your biggest problems later on. You can't heal what you don't feel, so talking about it will hurt. Talking about it is a sign that you respect yourself enough to get help. It doesn't matter if others have been through more. You don't have to be Rambo. You have to be you. If it affected you, it affected you.

Can You Help Yourself?

What if you don't feel safe asking for help? Can you work it out by yourself? The shrinks all say it is better if you can find someone to share it with, but if you can't the important things to think about are what you saw, what actually happened, what you wanted to have happen, how you felt. It is really important to feel the pain. Trauma is painful. Writing and drawing can also help ease the pain whether you write in a journal or write out your pain and burn the paper. Use your feelings to write a poem, a rap, or a song. Making a drawing or a collage can help, too.

Finally: Once you have gotten over some of the pain, helping other survivors of crime and violence talk openly and with feeling about their experience—if you can—can help them and help you give meaning to what happened to you. This too will bring up pain, but it may help you heal. Turning a terrible experience into something which can help others can sometimes keep us going when nothing else can. Take it easy and realize it takes time to get over stuff like this. It will probably always bother you a bit. Accepting that as normal can help you deal with it again whenever it comes up, because new events may re-trigger the old reactions. This is normal, too.

©1992 Patience H C Mason. All rights reserved.

Herbs may help

My health food store gives out free copies of a magazine called *Better Nutrition*. The November, 2000 issue had an article called “Herbs to the Rescue,” which discussed adaptogenic herbs which help “a variety of body systems to cope with physical and emotional stress.” The author, Jamison Stabuck, JD, ND, a licensed naturopathic and homeopathic physician, recommends Siberian (*eleutherococcus senticosus*) ginseng and Panax ginseng (Chinese). She reports that the two ginsengs and another herb she recommends, ashwaganda, are thought to support and improve the functions of the adrenal gland including the production of cortisol.

Cortisol is the primary anti-stress hormone. Under stress, particularly traumatic stress, the body secretes adrenaline to give you the strength to survive, run or fight. After the stress is over, the adrenal gland produces cortisol which returns the body to its pre-adrenaline state. Scientific studies of trauma survivors have shown depletion of normal cortisol levels, which is probably why some people have such a hard time, particularly when triggered. There isn’t enough of the hormone to help you return to calmness. Hypervigilance may be one of the results.

Andrew Weil, MD, has also recommended these herbs as general tonics in his books, *Spontaneous Healing* and *8 Weeks to Optimum Health*, so I would not be afraid to give one of them a two month trial. He mentions that panax ginseng may “raise blood pressure in some individuals as well as cause irritability and insomnia.” If this happens he suggests a lower dose or switching to panax quinquefolius (American ginseng). Try products that have standardized ginsenoside content. For Siberian ginseng, look for standardized eleutheroside content. Ashwaganda comes in capsules and extracts in health food stores and is an Ayurvedic medicine. Follow directions on the package for all three.

I would talk to your doctor about this, simply because your doctor needs to know what you are taking, but remember most American doctors are not familiar with herbs. Reading what Dr Weil has to say might or might not reassure your doctor, but it certainly inspires me. I have been taking another of the tonic herbs he recommends for several years now and it has helped me get over the Epstein Barr virus that made me too tired to stand up to clean my teeth. I’m back to running up and down the stairs again!

Welcome to PTSDland

Dear Patience,

I generally don’t give permission for people to use Welcome To Holland unless they use it as written, uncut and unchanged but I must say that I was very moved by the adaptation you wrote and was grateful that you referred to the original correctly and gave me credit for having written it.

I have friends who have experienced PTSD and I hope you won’t mind if I share your insightful essay with them. People dealing with PTSD and their families and friends have a particular set of challenges, often misunderstood or trivialized, as you point out. I’m glad that it is finally being recognized as a real disorder and that people are rallying to provide support and treatment options. That doesn’t always make the day-to-day challenges any less daunting, as you know, but at least it’s out in the open.

I wish you all the best of luck in your own journey and in your efforts to help others.

—Emily Perl Kingsley