

Resiliency after Trauma

The Amazing Brain & Nervous System

The human brain and nervous system can do a lot of amazing things, and their main job is to keep you alive. The most important ways that a brain and nervous system keep someone alive happen without the person even having to think about them (like keeping your heart beating or digesting your lunch).

Have you ever jumped a little bit when you suddenly heard a loud noise? Your brain was taking in a lot of information to figure out if you were safe or not. Your brain was preparing to react if you were in immediate danger.

When a person actually *is* in danger (like during a violent crime), the brain creates chemical changes throughout the nervous system to give the person the best chance to get out of the dangerous situation alive. These chemicals cause physical responses and temporary changes to the way a brain processes information. Just like how a person doesn't have to concentrate hard to keep their heart beating, these changes happen without a person actively thinking about them. Often, this is referred to as our survival instinct.

Traumatic Memories

The brain makes and stores memories that are associated with the victimization different (and stronger) than memories associated with everyday life. Sometimes, people refer to memories associated with victimization as "traumatic memories" or "memory capsules." Some people compare them to a "mind imprint."

Traumatic memories contain specific information from the time the harm happened, like sights, sounds,

Ways to Feel Calmer & Become More Grounded in the Moment

(Courtesy of Trauma Resource Institute)

Drink a glass of water.

Look around the room or wherever you are, paying attention to anything that catches your attention.

Name six colors you see in the room (or outside).

Open your eyes if they have a tendency to shut.

Count backwards from 10 as you walk around the room.

If you're inside, notice the furniture, and touch the surface, noticing if it is hard, soft, rough, etc...

Notice the temperature in the room.

Notice the sounds within the room and outside.

If you're outside or inside, walk and pay attention to the movement in your arms and legs and how your feet are making contact with the ground.

Push your hands against the wall or door slowly and notice your muscles pushing.

smells, details of the place where the crime occurred, and/or qualities about the person who caused the harm. This happens automatically so that the brain can recognize warning signs and protect the person from similar harm in the future. When the brain senses that the person may be in similar danger, it can “trigger” (or bring back) the traumatic memories and make the person feel like his or her life is in danger again. The person may feel like he or she is reliving the harm all over again, or can feel like he or she is watching the victimization happen from a distance. Since this cannot be controlled or predicted, it can be very disturbing. It is important to know this is very normal for anyone who has survived a traumatic event.

Some people call this experience a “flashback.” Sometimes flashbacks happen suddenly and can be over quickly. Sometimes flashbacks can last for a longer period of time. You may have heard about war veterans who experience flashbacks; crime survivors can have these reactions, too.

Some common triggers include:

- Places, social events, or even smells, tastes and sounds
- Being around other people who were involved in the victimization (the person who caused the harm, witnesses, or other survivors)
- The anniversary of the victimization
- Hearing about another violent event

Just because someone is triggered doesn’t mean they have to start the healing process all over again. The trigger is just the person’s mind and body’s way of saying that the harm that was done to them might deserve a little more attention and care.

Ten Ingredients for Comprehensive Healing Over Time

1. Sessions with a trustworthy therapist/coach
2. Support group
3. Education/information on trauma
4. Medication
5. Prayer, symbolic ritual
6. Relaxation, self-soothing, breath work, meditation, etc.
7. Physical exercise
8. Bodywork – massage, Reiki, etc.
9. Journaling, art, poetry, movement
10. Guided imagery – as stand alone, or with other sensory-based treatments

(Adapted from Belleruth Naparstek, *Invisible Heroes: Survivors of Trauma and How they Heal*)