Understanding and healing emotional trauma: conversations with pioneering clinicians and researchers

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Understanding and healing emotional trauma — the culmination of an eight-year project — is a compilation of personal conversations, lecture notes and excerpts from the existing works of the book’s contributors. The author, Daniella Sieff, holds a PhD in biological anthropology and is a writer, researcher and scholar with particular interests in the dynamics of the human psyche. The contributors represent forerunners in their respective fields: Donald Kalsched, Bruce Lloyd, Tina Stromsted and Marion Woodman (psychotherapists); Ellert Nijenhuis, Allan Schore and Daniel Siegel (neurobiologists); and Jim Chisholm, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy and Randy Nesse (evolutionary researchers). This collection of interviews creatively and comprehensively explores the causes, consequences and treatment of emotional trauma from a psychodynamic, neurobiological and evolutionary perspective. In three sections corresponding to each perspective, the book explores: 1) what, why and how unconscious systems emerge out of emotional trauma; 2) how our brains and bodies mediate emotions on a neurobiological level; and 3) the evolutionary purpose of emotions and attachment. The chapters merge eloquently and the three conceptual frameworks are skilfully interwoven throughout the book.

In the introductory chapter, Sieff defines emotional trauma as more than merely a painful or frightening event. She discusses the impact and effects of these events, often incurred during childhood, on the psyche and body, and subsequently on relationships with the self and others. She emphasises the often unconscious processes behind trauma and how these are expressed through neural networks and hormonal systems not in our everyday awareness. Sieff expands trauma beyond the individual to the trans-generational level, whereby an individual vicariously expresses symptoms of trauma through inherited fears, slanted perceptions and distorted ways of relating to others.

Section 1: Psychodynamic perspectives

Section one explores the psychodynamics of emotional trauma, and the influence that these dynamics have on our ways of relating to others and self.

In her interview with Donald Kalsched (chapter one), the double-edged sword of the traumatised psyche is explored. Kalsched describes the emergence of the psychological system of a traumatised child as initially protective, however, these defences become self-traumatising and ultimately contribute to self-perpetuated suffering. The “inner self-care system” that emerges in the wake of trauma sees threat in innocuous situations and descends whenever earlier trauma is triggered. This process restricts whole engagement with the world and hinders opportunities to learn and heal. The use of poetry and fairy tale in this chapter is eloquent in providing illustrative analogies for these complex ideas.
In an interview with J Bruce Lloyd (chapter two), the process of self-alienation, shame and addiction is explored. Consideration is given to the process whereby parents inadvertently block emotions in their small children that they themselves are unable to express, leaving the child with the feeling that he/she is abnormal for having this feeling. Eventually children learn to deny, disconnect or dissociate from this “shameful” part of themselves. Addiction is described as a “misguided attempt to attain healing though external means” (p. 29) which leads to further self-traumatising shame and alienation. In terms of implications for recovery, Lloyd explains that although trauma leaves children with no choice but to disconnect from perceived shameful aspects of themselves, recovery has to be a conscious decision, and involves an arduous inward journey that requires perseverance and courage.

In an interview with Tina Stromsted (chapter three), the physical impact and embodiment of emotional trauma is explored. The interview expounds how emotional experiences inevitably manifest in posture, movement and ways of speaking. This chapter is helpful in understanding various body related issues such as chronic pain, autoimmune disease, eating disorders, and body dysmorphic disorders. In the last portion of the interview, body related therapies are discussed, such as authentic movement, voice work, yoga and mask therapy.

The last chapter in the psychoanalytic section (chapter four) is an interview with Marion Woodman. Through the use of archetypal concepts, she explains the dynamics of emotional trauma in terms of an invalidating childhood whereby children develop an inauthentic self through internalising the caregiver’s negative energy. This interview is also peppered with the poetry of Emily Dickenson and Greek mythology to illustrate the discussion. Woodman describes the need to achieve and addiction (to substances, behaviours and ideologies) as attempts to fulfil the needs of our authentic selves. She quotes Emily Dickenson to augment her point that one cannot fill the soul with anything else but “soul food”: “you cannot solder an abyss with air” (p. 66). Woodman describes the healing process in terms of facing the internalised annihilating archetypes and bringing the unconscious to consciousness through a descent into the inner self.

Section 2: Neurobiological perspectives

Section two of the book provides detailed neurobiological explanations for concepts and processes explored in the first section.

In chapter five, Ellert RS Nijenhuis explains the process of dissociation. He describes the personality as split into the emotional parts (EPs) and apparently normal parts (ANPs). The ANPs become phobic of the EPs and learn to avoid triggers that would activate the EPs. Similarly, the EP is phobic of the ANP, yet its need to be heard frequently manifests through, for example, nightmares, acting out, beliefs, and physical symptoms.

In chapter six, Allan N Schore considers attachment theory in terms of its neurobiological correlates. He explains in detail the development of various brain structures and their function in the attachment process. Different types of attachment are elucidated and the impact that these early attachments have on the developing brain is discussed. The concept of shame is revisited in the chapter and here it is described in terms of its development neurobiologically. Further, Schore differentiates shame from guilt. Guilt is described as a product of the later developing verbal left brain; shame develops much earlier as a product of the non-verbal right brain. This chapter’s discussion on shame brilliantly expands on the discussion in section one. Finally, Schore explains how healing occurs through the “right brain to right brain” connection between therapist and client.

The final chapter of section two is an interview with Dan Siegel (chapter seven) where the role of implicit memory in emotional trauma is explained. He extends the discussion on attachment from previous chapters, explaining how healthy attachment fosters neural integration whereas insecure attachment restricts it. He explains how early attachment models are encoded in implicit memory. Section two provides an excellent supplementary understanding of the material explored in section one.
Section 3: Evolutionary perspectives

The final section of the book provides an evolutionary developmental understanding of the topics covered in previous chapters. In chapter eight, James S Chrisholm explores the evolutionary function of attachment and challenges the notion of normal development, positing that even insecure attachment styles are ultimately adaptive in certain harsh environments.

In chapter nine, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy discusses the evolutionary processes involved in the developing mother–infant bond. In chapter ten, Randolph M Nesse provides an evolutionary perspective on understanding emotions.

Sieff concludes the book with a summative chapter that integrates the three frameworks to provide a comprehensive overview of “trauma-worlds”, how they emerge, and how they can be transformed.

Conclusion

The interview style of this book creates a stimulating yet accessible read of otherwise complex and profound ideas and concepts. Sieff’s well-informed comments and insightful questioning stimulates a rich conversation with the contributors, and often pre-empts the reader’s own thoughts. The only critique of this book is that addiction is not explored beyond the first section. It would have been valuable to obtain the other contributors’ perspectives on addiction from their conceptual backgrounds.

This book is recommended for anyone looking to gain an interdisciplinary understanding of emotional trauma; for mental health professionals working with children and adults looking to develop a deeper, more embodied, understanding of emotional trauma and its sequelae; for physical therapists and medical doctors eager to expand their perspective on the etiology of physical illness and dysfunction; and for individuals interested in understanding their own “trauma-worlds” be it the consequence of abuse or neglect, or repressed but embodied “micro” traumas sustained in their early development.

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