

Introduction

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This interdisciplinary book explores our current understanding of emotional trauma through conversations with pioneering clinicians and academics. It brings together leading figures from psychotherapy, neurobiology and evolution to offer answers to questions such as: What is emotional trauma? What causes it? What are its consequences? What does it mean to recover from the impact of emotional trauma? How can that recovery be achieved?

Facing emotional trauma, both personally and professionally, is extremely challenging. However due, in large part, to the innovative work of the contributors, we now have a better understanding of the forces involved in both the creation and healing of emotional trauma. This book invites a broad readership into that understanding. It is written for all those who are struggling with their own emotional trauma, as well as for the therapists, counsellors, social workers and others who accompany people through the process of healing. Because so much emotional trauma has its roots in childhood, this book is also written for parents, teachers and anyone engaged in the care of children.

Emotional Trauma

Emotional trauma is defined not only by painful and frightening experiences, but also by the *impact* these experiences have on us and by their long-term *effects* on our lives. When our experiences are unbearably painful or frightening, if we have an intrinsically sensitive nature, and if there is nobody to whom we can turn for emotional support, a damaging imprint is left on our mind, brain and body, sending our lives onto a different path. Just how different our life-path turns out to be depends on the extent of the damage. However, instead of developing in a way that would allow us to become emotionally secure, and to fulfil our potential, crucial aspects of our lives become organised around the traumatising experiences. We are driven by a hidden fear of retraumatisation which is burnt deeply into our brains and bodies. We dissociate from our emotions, as well as from any parts of our personality which have attracted disapproval. We come to experience ourselves within the distorting framework of shame, believing that we are fundamentally defective and inadequate. As a result, the way that we relate to ourselves, to other people and to the world around us is compromised and distorted.

These responses are primarily unconscious. They are expressed through the neural networks and hormonal systems that are invisible to everyday awareness. All that we know is that life is a struggle. We feel empty and unable to engage with the world. We sense that our lives are

somewhat false – that we are not being quite true to ourselves. We exist within an omnipresent haze of anxiety. We feel a gnawing sense of inadequacy. We harbour a fear of being uncovered as a fraud. We hate what we have become. We loathe our bodies. We see ourselves and others through a lens of blame and fault. We develop a victim mentality. We become addicts. We disappear into a world of fantasy. We descend into depression and hopelessness. We develop painful and unexplained physical symptoms. We behave self-destructively. We are drawn to damaging relationships. We are paralysed when we need to speak out. We explode with rage when we need to reflect. Our personality fragments and dissociates and we find ourselves absent whilst some apparent invader directs our actions. Living in any of these states can leave us wishing that we were dead, and that wish may beckon us towards suicide.

The overwhelming pain and fear at the root of trauma can have many different origins. Sometimes it is the result of a single dramatic event; other times it is a response to the underlying and ongoing attitudes and ways of relating which are implicit in our family, school, religion or culture. Sometimes our pain and fear results from overt physical or sexual violence; other times it is a response to being an unwanted or orphaned child, or to being repeatedly undermined, invalidated and shamed.

In some instances the original painful experiences happened to previous generations rather than directly to us. In these cases it is the hidden fears and distorted ways of relating that our recent ancestors developed which are surreptitiously and unconsciously passed on to us, and which lie at the root of our trauma.

Our evolutionary heritage, spanning millions of years, also influences the dynamics of emotional trauma, leaving us predisposed to find certain experiences particularly painful and frightening, as well as to respond to such experiences in the ways that enabled our distant ancestors to survive and parent children. Typically these ancient responses create additional layers of suffering. Sometimes they are inappropriate in today's environment.

Although emotional trauma can occur at any point during our lives, the consequences of suffering trauma during infancy and childhood are particularly significant and long-lasting. That is because early relationships with parents and other caregivers (known as 'attachment relationships') influence the development of our emotional brains, fear response and reproductive physiology. Thus, young children who are abused, neglected or who simply have parents who are unable to attune to them—perhaps because they themselves are depressed, stressed, or traumatised—will develop along different biological pathways to children whose parents are sensitive and responsive to their needs.

Our early attachment relationships are also important because they are the basis upon which we build unconscious mental models regarding the world and our place in it. If our caregivers are responsive to us we come to experience ourselves as loveable, relationships as trustworthy and the world as safe, but if our caregivers are not attentive then we come to experience ourselves as inherently unlovable, relationships as untrustworthy, and the world as hostile. Unless these mental models are explicitly brought into consciousness and challenged, they may last a life-time. And because they determine how we behave, they create painful, repetitive and self-fulfilling cycles.

Unconscious mental models are not only formed in the context of our early attachment relationships, they are also formed in response to other environments, including that of our school,

religion and culture. In addition, experiences that we have as older children, teenagers and adults can create powerful mental models about the world and our place in it. Mental models formed later can be just as limiting as those formed earlier in our lives.

One of the most damaging aspects of emotional trauma is that its consequences become so deeply ingrained within our minds, brains and bodies that we are unable to step aside from the trauma and see its impact on us, let alone change it. Instead we mistakenly believe that our suffering is the result of 'who we are' at some innate and immutable level.

Equally problematic is that being unaware of the trauma buried in our unconscious, we have little choice but to focus our energy on trying to alleviate the visible surface symptoms, perhaps through short-term therapy or psychotherapeutic drugs, or by pinning our hopes to something like a new romantic relationship or cosmetic surgery. These kinds of surface measures can give us temporary respite, but they do not touch the trauma which lies at the root of our distress, so in time we will fall back into our suffering.

Ultimately, the only way to recover from emotional trauma is to go beneath the surface, enter the world of the unconscious, and explore our wounds from inside our emotional self. We need to slowly make our way to the heart of our wounds, develop an embodied and experiential consciousness of how they play out in our lives, and find new and healthier ways to relate to them. We cannot do this work alone. To safely enter the world of the unconscious, and to build the new neural networks which will allow us to move beyond our trauma, we need to be working with somebody who can offer us an attuned, mindful, compassionate and therapeutic relationship.

Even then, healing does not necessarily mean that we will reach a place where trauma no longer has any affect on our lives. We cannot change the past. We cannot un-experience what we have already experienced. We are not machines and we cannot replace old, broken parts with new, shiny ones. What is more, we have evolved to remember, often at an unconscious and embodied level, anything that caused us unbearable pain and fear. We have also evolved to react automatically to anything that resembles our traumatising experiences. These reactions can be seen as the enduring legacy of our wounds, and render us particularly vulnerable under certain situations. However, if we do the inner work required to travel to the heart of our wounds, then we can reduce the impact of earlier trauma to create more fulfilling, authentic and meaningful lives.

There are many ways in which the wisdom embodied in the conversations that constitute this book can help us to do that inner work. First, by describing the systems constellated by trauma in terms of their psychology, neurobiology and evolution, these conversations enable us to step outside our trauma-derived existence and recognise what we are living. Second, the truths presented in these conversations act as magnets which reach deep below the surface of consciousness and pull our hidden traumatic reality into our awareness. Third, these conversations help us to change how we experience ourselves by explaining that we behave as we do not because there is something intrinsically wrong with us, but because this is how human beings respond to trauma. Fourth, these conversations allow us to know that we are not alone with our suffering, and that there are people who do understand. And fifth, these conversations show us that there is a way beyond our trauma and they offer us maps of the territory that we need to traverse.

We can recover from the impact of emotional trauma, but recovery is neither a quick nor an easy process. There is light to be found at the end of the tunnel but the tunnel is often long, dark and

frightening, both for those making their way through the tunnel and for those who accompany them. The aim of this book is to provide points of illumination in that darkness.

The Perspectives

The contributors to this book have their roots in what can loosely be described as three different perspectives: psychodynamic psychotherapy, neurobiology, and evolution. The book is structured accordingly. At the beginning of each chapter there is a summary which I will not repeat here. Instead, I will highlight some of the questions addressed by each perspective.

Part I - Psychodynamic Perspectives

These four chapters explore the psychological dynamics that emerge in response to emotional trauma, and show us how these dynamics influence the way we relate both to ourselves and to others. The psychotherapists contributing to this part of the book are Donald Kalsched, Bruce Lloyd, Tina Stromsted and Marion Woodman. Drawing on professional and personal experience, case studies, myths, poetry and fairy tales, their chapters take us into the inner world of the unconscious mind and body to illuminate what happens following emotional wounding, and how that affects our lived experience. As importantly, they bring to life the work we need to do if we are to heal. Collectively, these chapters invite us to look deeply within ourselves, and they show us how we might go about that. Some of the questions they address include:

- What are the unconscious systems that emerge as a result of emotional trauma? What does it feel like to live a life built around these systems?
- Why does the traumatised psyche become self-traumatising? How do the systems created to defend our psyche, create new layers of suffering?
- Why is shame—a feeling of being fundamentally defective and inadequate—an inevitable consequence of emotional trauma? How are our lives affected when we experience ourselves through shame?
- What is the difference between blame and responsibility? Why is this distinction important for healing trauma?
- What is the link between emotional trauma and addiction?
- How does emotional trauma affect our physical bodies, as well as our relationship with our bodies?
- How does the trauma of our parents and grandparents affect us?
- How do we get to know the unconscious mind-body systems that we created in the wake of our traumatic experiences?
- How do we create real, lasting and meaningful change? What does it feel like to go through a process of change? What is required of us? What is required of those who accompany us?
- If we have suffered emotional trauma, then what does it mean to be well?

Part II - Neurobiological Perspectives

These three chapters explore the biological systems that come into play with emotional trauma, and they describe how these systems are expressed in our lives. The therapist-academics contributing to this section are Ellert Nijenhuis, Allan Schore and Daniel Siegel. Drawing on professional experience, case studies and literature, attachment theory, developmental

psychology, interpersonal neurobiology and endocrinology, these contributors take us into the physical substrate of brain and body. This helps us to understand the neurobiological underpinnings of what happens to us both in the aftermath of unbearable pain and fear, and during healing. Collectively, these chapters enable us to understand our subjective experiences within the current scientific framework. Some of the questions addressed in these chapters include:

- How do our brains and bodies mediate emotions? What does it take to feel emotionally secure? What causes emotional insecurity?
- Why is dissociation intrinsic to trauma? What neurobiological processes underlie dissociation?
- How do the right and the left hemispheres of the brain differ? Why are these differences important in understanding emotional trauma?
- What is the ‘attachment system’? How do early attachment relationships shape our developing brains, nervous and hormonal systems? How does this affect our lives?
- How do our brains and bodies store the unconscious mental models formed during infancy, childhood and beyond? When models are formed during trauma, what does that mean for us?
- What are the biological mechanisms by which traumas suffered by previous generations are passed on?
- With severe emotional trauma an entire personality may fragment and become divided and dissociated in extreme ways – what biological processes underpin this?
- How can we restructure a brain and nervous system that has been shaped by trauma? What role do therapeutic relationships play? How can mindfulness practices contribute?
- Why is it impossible to heal trauma if we simply talk about our past experiences? Why must we enter into our unconsciously embodied experience to repair the damage?

Part III - Evolutionary Perspectives

These three chapters explore the ways in which our species’ evolutionary past has shaped the dynamics of emotional trauma, and show us how that past is visible in our lives today. The academics contributing to this part of the book are James Chisholm, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy and Randolph Nesse. Drawing on studies of hunter-gatherers, western societies, non-human primates and other mammals, as well as on modern evolutionary theory, attachment theory and developmental psychology, these chapters take us into the world of our distant ancestors to show us how the challenges they faced have left imprints on our minds and bodies. Collectively, these chapters enable us to understand our trauma in the wider context of our evolved humanity. Some of the questions addressed in these chapters include:

- Why do we have emotions? For what purpose did they evolve?
- Are happiness and emotional well-being goals of evolution?
- How can we ascertain whether an emotional state is pathological or normal?
- How has the deep history of our species shaped the relationship between human mothers and their children? Do mothers instinctively love all their children?
- Why are human infants so sensitive to the way their parents and caregivers relate to them?
- Children follow different developmental trajectories depending on the quality of their early attachment relationships; why do we need to consider the wider physical and social environment in which parents are living to understand these trajectories?

- Could the developmental trajectories that result from childhood emotional trauma be evolutionarily adaptive?
- Are there evolutionary reasons why we care so much about what others think of us, as well as about the quality of our social relationships?
- Why we are prone to becoming trapped in cycles of self-blame and shame?
- How can an evolutionary perspective on development, attachment and emotions contribute to the alleviation of suffering?

Part IV – Concluding Perspective

When we are emotionally traumatised, we live in an inner world built around the implicit conviction that some aspect of our survival is at risk. As a result, we have no choice but to experience ourselves, others and the world around us through the distorting dynamics of fear, dissociation and shame. This final chapter explores how a broad and integrated understanding of trauma can help us to dismantle these dynamics, transform our ‘trauma-worlds’, and build a more enriched life.

By way of illustration, this chapter addresses three questions by linking together the insights gleaned from the contributors:

- Why are particularly types of childhood experiences likely to leave us traumatised?
- Why does emotional trauma leave us prone to reacting in ways that create new suffering?
- Why is it so hard to make the changes that take us out of our trauma-worlds?

These questions were chosen because they represent different stages in the process of trauma and healing, and because they create an opportunity to discuss important principles that are relevant to working with emotional trauma more generally.

Constructing the Conversations

I invited these contributors to participate in this book because their work has made a profound and innovative contribution to our current understanding of emotional trauma and its healing. The chapters emerged from ongoing dialogues that drew on a variety of sources: personal conversations during our meetings, notes I made during seminars and workshops, and passages taken from existing writings. I constructed each chapter by interweaving material from these different sources in order to introduce the contributors’ ideas in a manner that is both accessible and has real depth. Once each chapter draft had been completed, it was passed back and forth between me and the contributor until the two of us were happy that it expressed both the essence and the depth of their work.

This is essentially a personal book which has been eight years in the making. The deep understanding of the contributors has had a powerful impact on me, as I worked through my own experience of trauma. As I engaged with my healing journey, their insights provided me with a feeling of being seen and accompanied, enabled me to shed some of my shame, encouraged me connect to what I carried in both my mind and body, and freed me to experience myself differently. Their understanding also gave me hope that real change was possible and showed me what I needed to do to make that change happen. I sincerely hope that these conversations will be equally inspiring to others who are on a healing journey.