

"Trauma-Worlds"

Life In a Reality Shaped by Fearfulness, Disconnection, and Shame

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If our childhood is emotionally wounding, survival systems are activated in both our minds and bodies. As a result, we live our lives from inside a reality which is different to the one we would have inhabited had we not been wounded. This parallel reality is embodied in the biological systems that mediate both our emotions and our perceptions of ourselves and other people. It is as though we have been transported into Narnia – only this version of Narnia is constructed around our wounds. I've named this parallel reality a "**trauma-world**".

While each trauma-world is unique, having been shaped by our personal experiences and individual disposition, there are three systems which form the core of all trauma-worlds:

- **Hypervigilance.** The external world is perceived through a veil of fear: we carry an embodied and implicit mistrust of other people, situations and opportunities.
- **Disconnection.** Parts of ourselves become exiled: we are distanced from our emotions, our bodies and some aspects of our personality.
- **Shame.** Our emotional identity is distorted: we experience ourselves as being fundamentally inadequate, and feel ourselves to be unworthy of relationships, and undeserving of success.

Hypervigilance – a heightened sensitivity to potential danger – is the result of changes in the biological systems that mediate fear. Many species have a fear system that can be set to different levels of sensitivity (depending on early experience and epigenetic inheritance). This flexibility is adaptive: in a dangerous environment it is better to be easily frightened than dead.

Of course, there are costs to having a sensitised fear system. We suffer from anxiety. We are constantly looking out for danger and have little spare energy to invest in play, creative pursuits, and the relationships that would contribute to a sense of well-being. We are also at risk of seeing danger where none exists and tend to react to that imagined danger in ways that create self-fulfilling prophecies. Furthermore, the hormonal profile that underlies hypervigilance can impact the immune system and leave us at risk of suffering from physical illnesses.

Disconnection – being exiled from parts of ourselves – is a consequence of fear. We may bury the painful emotions embedded in past wounds, afraid that if these feelings enter awareness, we will be overwhelmed. Alternatively, we may deny aspects of who we are today, fearing that if these parts of ourselves are expressed, then we will be abandoned or attacked. The fear that drives disconnection often resides outside of our conscious awareness; all the same, we disconnect from an aspect of our internal reality in the hope that this will protect us.

This form of protection also comes with costs. Being disconnected, we never feel entirely real or secure; moreover, to prevent the feared experience from re-emerging, we try to control ourselves, other people, and the situations that we encounter. The need to control is damaging in and of itself, and it introduces new fears: not only are we frightened of what we carry internally, we become fearful of losing control too. One way to disconnect from a feared aspect of our life is to shut it away in our body and retreat into our head, but this somatic disconnection creates new layers of suffering. In its most extreme form, the drive to exile parts of who we are, may result in a dissociative identity disorder.

Shame – a visceral feeling of fundamental inadequacy – is closely related to fear. Although shame leaves us feeling absolutely alone, its evolutionary and developmental origins lie in the implicit fear that we are unworthy of human relationships. When experienced as a passing feeling, shame offers protection; it warns us that we are in danger of losing valued support and/or of being thrown out of the group which, for most of human existence, would have meant death.

When trauma is present, however, shame becomes an enduring feature of our emotional identity. There are heavy costs to this. First and foremost, we inevitably experience ourselves through a distorted lens. This is so painful that we will strive to escape: we might attempt to dissociate our shame, achieve (some unachievable) perfection, or accumulate power; we might also seek a temporary escape from our shame by addictively altering our mood. None of these attempts to escape will succeed; rather, all will ultimately compound our shame.

Having a shame-full inner identity, not only distorts our relationship with ourselves; it also distorts our relationships with others. Terrified that if people get to know us they will see us as the inadequate human being we believe ourselves to be, we put up barriers, push people away, and sabotage relationships. At the same time we try to control others in the hope of preventing them from doing anything that could inadvertently expose us. We are generally unconscious of our behaviour, however, because we sense that our interactions lack trust and intimacy, our fear of being unworthy of relationships is affirmed. In short, shame creates more shame.

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One of the challenges of growing up inside a trauma-world is that, having no other point of reference, we find it hard to recognise hypervigilance, disconnection and shame for what they are.

Also, although trauma-worlds are created to protect us from external events, once established they create a distorted, rigid and closed internal system which leaves us with no choice but to relate to ourselves and others in ways which are ultimately retraumatising. In short, trauma-worlds become self-traumatising. They are also self-perpetuating.

In this blog, there is not enough space to explore how we can work our way beyond a trauma-world; however, with regard to healing, I wish to make one essential point. Healing requires the vulnerability to recognise that our lives are compromised not only by original wounding experiences, but also by the trauma-worlds we have unknowingly created in our minds and bodies in response to these experiences. We must not judge or blame ourselves for this – it is what humans do. Yet, until we take ownership of and responsibility for our internal survival systems, we cannot hope to move beyond both them and the costs that they impose.

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References and more on 'Trauma-worlds':

Sieff, Daniela F. 2016a. *Understanding and Healing Emotional Trauma [Video File]*.

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Daniela F. Sieff, D.Phil., is a scholar, writer and speaker. She has a PhD in biological anthropology from the University of Oxford, and an active interest in the dynamics of the human psyche. The question that engages her is: 'What makes us who we are?' She has been drawn to thinking about this question in interdisciplinary ways. Her doctoral work explored how evolutionary processes contribute to shaping human behavior. Her research took her to a wilderness region of Tanzania to live with a traditional cattle-herding people. In recent years Daniela has explored emotional trauma and healing through bringing together her own personal experience, with knowledge that comes from depth psychology, neurobiology, anthropology and evolution. Out of this work emerged her book: *Understanding and Healing Emotional Trauma: Conversations with Pioneering Clinicians and Researchers* (Routledge 2015).



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