

Trauma and Mindfulness:

Identifying triggering moments through mindfulness practice

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What is trauma?

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as an experience during which a person is directly or indirectly exposed to actual or threatened death or serious injury (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000). In this definition, scholars include events such as combat, childhood abuse, and rape. Current literature also describes trauma as betrayal, illness, infidelity, job loss, divorce, racism, and other events that threaten one's well-being (Levine, 2008; Waelde, Pennington, Mahan, Mahan, Kabour, & Marquette, 2010). The resulting stress, called traumatic stress, can cause mental, emotional, and physical symptoms. These include intrusive memories of the event (such as nightmares), avoidant and numbing behaviors (e.g., withdrawal, substance use), hyperarousal (chronic anxiety), and depression (chronic lethargy).

What happens in the body during traumatic stress?

The vagus nerve is the tenth cranial nerve in the body (Porges, 2011). The vagus nerve is connected to the brain and most organs in the body. It sends information from the brain to the body, and carries sensory information from the body to the brain. This nerve is responsible for regulating the nervous system's reaction to stress.

Our body's first response to stressful and threatening

situations is to use social engagement to calm down. If reaching out to others does not work, or if this option is not available, the vagus nerve activates the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) (Porges, 2011). The SNS is responsible for the fight/flight response that allows the body to fight against or flee from danger. Signs of SNS activation include increased heart rate, quick and shallow breathing, perspiration, racing thoughts, and tense muscles. When the body is able to successfully fight or flee the threatening event, it returns to being calm and once again uses social engagement as the primary way to achieve regulation.

If we cannot fight or flee, we experience a state of helplessness. This causes the vagus nerve to activate an immobilization response; we freeze (Scaer, 2005). Signs of this shutdown response include decreased heart rate, slow and shallow breathing, heaviness in the limbs, clouded thought patterns or dizziness, and lethargy.

The fight/flight and immobility responses of the vagus nerve can overwhelm the nervous system. When these responses become acute and/or chronic, as they do in trauma, they change the way we remember an event. This can make it less likely that we will be able to recall it with detail in the future.

Traumatic stress and memory

Traumatic stress has a negative effect on memory. In order to encode a complete memory, we need three parts of our experience from three parts of our brain: bodily sensations (brain stem), emotions (limbic system), and a

narrative (prefrontal cortex). When these are combined, we have a memory that is integrated (Siegel, 2012b). The narrative is particularly important in this integration because it gives the memory a temporal quality; it allows the person to remember that the event occurred in the past.

During fight/flight or immobility, the brain changes in a way that interrupts this integration. The heightened SNS response during fight/flight and the shutdown response during immobility can disconnect the communication between the three parts of the brain (Siegel, 2012a). The sensations, emotions, and narrative become separated, or unintegrated. A memory can then be experienced in the body without emotions or a narrative consciously connected to it. This disconnection causes reminders of trauma to be experienced as if the traumatic event is once again occurring in the present.

Re-experiencing trauma can be a confusing, frightening experience. For example, the smell of smoke may cause a survivor to hyperventilate, which is the reaction she had when her house burned down. Similarly, a man may become deeply depressed at the end of a long-term relationship; his body may be reacting similarly to when his father abandoned the boy during childhood. Without a connecting narrative, the body does not differentiate the present-day reminder from the past trauma. The unintegrated nature of these memories causes the reminder to be experienced as if the trauma is happening all over again. Reminders of a past traumatic experience are called triggering moments or triggers.

Importance of triggers in trauma work

In triggering moments, survivors re-experience the sensations, emotions, and behaviors that occurred during the traumatic event (Cori, 2008). These similarities provide information about what happened during the original trauma and can be used to help the survivor heal (Schore, 2012). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, connecting the similarities between trigger and

trauma is crucial to many treatment plans for resolving trauma. In particular, Yesko's Nine Steps to the Other Side of Triggered™ Assessment and Intervention helps clients connect current triggers with past traumas, and resolves the trauma by using empowering behaviors to resolve the triggering moment (Yesko, Seewald, & Bakos, 2012). This trauma work targets the neural integration of the traumatic event and can reduce – or even eliminate – the symptoms of traumatic stress. The first step of this process is to recognize the physiological shifts that occur during triggering moments. Mindfulness practice can teach survivors to cultivate this awareness and to begin the journey toward healing.

Identifying triggers through mindfulness practice

Mindfulness practice can cultivate awareness of the body's response to a trigger. Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 2006). Mindfulness is the intentional practice of bringing the mind back to the present moment whenever it goes astray. Ongoing mindfulness practice can strengthen neural networks in the brain associated with emotion and attention regulation, and body awareness (Hölzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, & Ott, 2011). Mindfulness practices, particularly those that focus on the body, can increase a survivor's awareness of the internal physiological changes associated with triggers, and can promote efficacy of treatment plans that target neural integration.

There are a number of mindfulness techniques a survivor can practice. The STOP method is a quick way to use mindfulness throughout the day (see text box). Practicing formal seated meditation fifteen minutes a day has also been shown to strengthen neural networks associated with body awareness (Hölzel et al., 2011). In this practice, a person sits in a quiet area and focuses on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. When

distracted by thoughts, feelings, or sensations, the person repeatedly brings focus back to the breath. Mindfulness is not aimed at controlling or eliminating distractions, but rather is the practice of refocusing the mind over and over again.

Body scans are also helpful in cultivating body awareness. In this practice, an individual sits or lies down, and is guided with a script that shifts conscious awareness to different parts of the body. Body scans are particularly effective in helping a person become familiar with internal experiences. By practicing mindfulness regularly, a survivor develops awareness of the physiological shifts that indicate a triggering moment has occurred. This first step is crucial in treatment plans designed to integrate unresolved trauma.

Conclusion

Traumatic reactions can occur in response to a wide variety of events. The body responds to traumatic stress by activating the vagus nerve which elicits either a fight/flight or immobilization response. These responses change the brain and cause it to separate the sensations, emotions, and narrative associated with the event. This makes it difficult for trauma survivors to differentiate past trauma from present-day situations when they encounter triggering moments. The first step to integrating unresolved trauma requires awareness of the shifts in the body that suggest a triggering moment is taking place. By practicing mindfulness, survivors hone in on their physiological experience and learn to detect changes. With this awareness, they can begin the healing process as they grow more flexible and empowered in their responses to remnants of the past.

Quick & Easy Mindfulness

The “STOP” method is an easy way to integrate mindfulness into daily practice. It serves as a check-in and can help you calm down. Whenever you’re feeling stressed or overwhelmed, remember to:

Stop what you’re doing.

Take a breath.

Observe your thoughts, feelings and sensations.

Proceed more mindfully focused.

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