

## TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES AND PTSD

### What qualifies as a traumatic experience?

The definition of trauma can be defined as a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. The list of what constitutes a traumatic experience would be very long indeed, as what one person finds traumatic may not necessarily be the case for another. However, what these experiences do share in common is that a strong emotional reaction will be present at the time.

Lets take fear for example. A man is driving his car to work and as he reaches a busy junction a car hits him from the side and sends his vehicle into a spin. He tries desperately to avoid other cars on the road and take back control of his vehicle. This is enough to frighten the best of us. And most of us if we are unlucky enough to being involved in an accident would be afraid.

Now at the time our brain will have taken a photograph of that entire scenario, and this photograph gets tagged with the sights, sounds, smells what we were thinking and feeling at the time, it also tags the emotions we were experiencing at that time, in this case fear. So why does it do that and what happens to it?

The unconscious part of our brain actually records everything that we see and hear, but the vast majority of that information is just stored away and we are never consciously aware of it, unless we suddenly have

need of it. An example of this would be when you are considering buying a new car. You might think that there aren't many of this particular make, model and colour around, but then suddenly you start seeing them everywhere! There aren't suddenly more of them around, it's just that our unconscious mind has never had any reason before to make us aware of them. So whilst we are always scanning and storing away information, the difference in a trauma situation is that information that is connected to an emotional threat is stored away in a different part of the brain.

## Patterns in the brain

In order to understand how the brain processes trauma, it's necessary to explain a little about pattern matching.

At some point in our lives, every experience was new to us; the first day at nursery or infant school, the first crush, the first kiss we ever had, the first time we had a driving lesson, the list is endless. Let's take driving as an example. When we sit in that driver's seat for the very first lesson we don't have in our knowledge bank a pattern of how to drive. The instructor is telling us, 'mirror, signal, manoeuvre', and we're trying to do all this and trying to indicate but the wipers are going off. Perhaps we're bunny-hopping down the road as we try to work the clutch. That's a lot of new things to learn and do all at once and it requires a lot of focus, because until we have had a few lessons and we start to form a *PATTERN* of how to drive then it feels quite alien to us. But as the pattern starts to form we can begin to relax a little as we start to do things with far less focus, automatically in fact, which is great because it saves our brains massive amounts of time and energy.

## Knowledge storage

Our patterns of knowledge get stored away for future use, so when we come across something that we have never done before, we can enter our knowledge bank and pull something out that is similar in some way.

However, the patterns we hold have to be very loose, because if they weren't we'd only be able to drive the car we learned in (and do you know how difficult it is to get parts for a 1989 Vauxhall Nova?) Luckily because the pattern of how to drive is loose, once we have learned to drive, we can pretty much drive any car.

## **Introducing our very own security officer**

Enter the amygdala. This is the brain's alarm system, and its job is to ensure our survival. It constantly scans the environment for potential threats, comparing all in-coming stimulation, supplied by our various senses, with survival templates - fear memories - to see if they are life threatening or life enhancing. A crackle of twigs or a sudden silence in the forest may trigger the alarm system because previous experience or knowledge of a crackle or silence has signalled a danger.

If a danger is pattern-matched to, this sets in motion an emotional reaction which leads to freezing, fight or flight. The experience is formed into a sensory memory and is passed on to an adjacent organ in the brain called the hippocampus (memory store) before being transferred to our neocortex (thinking brain).

When a deeply traumatic event occurs, however, the emotional reaction can be so strong that it remains coded in wordless form in the amygdala, permanently retained there as a survival pattern in case it is suddenly needed again in a similar future emergency. (When stress is at a very high level, as in perceived life-threatening moments, the hippocampus is less able to lay down coherent memories and transfer them to the higher cortex.) It is because of the strength of the emotional reaction that the amygdala won't let go of the pattern and the transfer of information across to the hippocampus doesn't take place. Thereafter, whenever that memory is reactivated by something in the environment that in some way recalls the traumatic moment - a certain sound, smell, object or whatever - the amygdala triggers the alarm reaction. This is when PTSD can occur.

## **Sub-threshold memories, not PTSD**

You may not be suffering with full blown PTSD, but you may have had a deeply distressing experience, and some of these experiences can have a large negative impact on our lives and produce some of the same symptoms as PTSD. Some examples of these would be bullying, panic attacks (so frightening we will do anything to avoid another one), car accidents, heart attacks, a serious illness or witnessing the loss of a loved one. We have had clients that have been traumatised by hearing about something deeply distressing. All this being said you may have had a traumatic experience but dealt with it very well to the point that it is not an issue for you, for some people this is not the case. This isn't a sign of strength or weakness, it's just that we all process experiences differently.

If you do find yourself having an excessive reaction to someone criticising you or getting very angry over something quite minor, then it's possible that you have an old pattern or program running from an experience that originally caused a strong emotional reaction.

## **How would you know if you had a traumatic memory?**

A traumatic memory may cause any or all of the following symptoms: nightmares, intrusive re-occurring memories, sudden outbursts of anger, panic attacks, depression, overreaction to sudden noises and intense flashbacks; even hallucinating going through the terrible event again and again as if it were happening now. Sufferers frequently feel numb and unable to express emotions and often have a deep-seated belief that they will not live to old age. Traumatic memories usually still feel very fresh even years after the event, this is because often they are brought to mind by being triggered off frequently.

## **What is the treatment and how long will it take?**

PTSD and trauma can be treated very successfully with the techniques that we use. In our experience, someone who has suffered a

single-incident trauma is usually helped in 3 sessions. The first session we gather some information and explain about what is happening in the brain as well as teaching techniques to help you. In the second session we will work on the trauma, with a follow-up session to check the results of the treatment and work on anything else that might need to be dealt with.

Where the trauma is more involved the trauma memory itself is still normally dealt with in one session, but there is often some extra work to do to help the person perhaps build confidence or help them move out of a depression or anger disorder that has been created by the memory. However, it is our aim to help you in as few sessions as possible.

### **Too embarrassed to talk about your trauma?**

Apart from being highly effective and rapid the technique we use does not require us to know all the sensitive details. So we will not get you to go over it in great detail, it's just not necessary. This makes this type of therapy ideal for people who have been raped or suffered sexual abuse, or indeed anything that is highly embarrassing to discuss.

### **Had therapy before and it didn't really work?**

Or perhaps it worked for a while but then the symptoms all came back? We come across this way too often sadly. If you have been reading the above sections about trauma then we're guessing that you are beginning to understand that trauma is not stored in the Neocortex (thinking brain), but that it is stored in the limbic system (emotional brain). And the part of the brain we are storing the traumas in precedes thought, by as much as half a second. So manually overriding the behaviour often isn't an option, because the pattern has been stored away in the pattern-matching part of our brain that keeps us safe.

So telling someone to 'Just stop behaving like that', even with the best will in the world is probably not going to work. It sometimes works for a little

while because we are manually interfering with the stored pattern, but this doesn't usually last and the behaviour or symptoms return.

Additionally, if you have therapy and the therapist, with the best intentions in the world I might add, gets you to talk repeatedly about this horrific experience, they are in danger of deepening the trauma. Maybe some of you have left a therapy session feeling worse and suffered poorer sleep for it. Trying to talk the trauma out is a little bit like going to the doctors with your right arm in pain, and they start examining the left. They are working in the wrong side of the brain. Although a lot of talking therapies can help suffering in the short term, and help you come to terms with the emotion surrounding the situation, you may have found that there are still some things in your life that you are struggling with. Unless the pattern has been dealt with it will still fire off when it feels that you are in danger.

Therapy doesn't have to be painful and long drawn out process and you don't have to go through feeling much worse before you can get better. **Effective and fast treatment for PTSD and trauma is possible.**

**“When the desire to change outweighs the desire to stay the same, then we can begin.”**