



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

the shame of pain and trauma

Shame is a toxic bodily experience as well as a toxic emotional experience. Shame is the feeling of red burning cheeks, downcast eyes that cannot look directly at another, and the deep desire to shrink and become invisible. One would think that being in pain or experiencing a trauma would be bad enough in and of itself, but unfortunately shame often compounds the pain and prevents people from seeking treatment.

Probably 15 years ago I met with a soft-spoken woman. She worked outside the home, took care of her children, and was a loving wife. However, every time she went to a basketball game with her husband she suffered the terror of a full-blown panic attack. As she sat in the stands and pretended to enjoy herself, she felt her heart racing, her palms sweating, and had extreme difficulty breathing—in short, the symptoms of a heart attack. She also felt deep shame, which had prevented her from seeking treatment for more than 10 years. She simply endured the terror, week after week.

Many people come to therapy only after years of suffering from anxiety and or depression. They have suffered in silence, feeling weak for having problems and too ashamed to ask for help. Soldiers are often fearful of ruining their careers if they acknowledge mental health problems. Veterans often feel survivor guilt and shame for needing help when others have lost their lives. The effects of war create trauma for not only the soldier, but also for parents, spouses, and children—and all too often the trauma goes untreated.

I believe some of the deepest shame is that of victims of physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse. The heartrending irony is that they often carry the blame for their abuse. They believe that somehow they did something to deserve the treatment they received.

The situation is often caused by the fact that the pain is at the hands of those who are supposed to love and care for them—parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins, other relatives or “friends.” The betrayal can be so unbearable, that rather than blame the abuser,

they take on the blame themselves. Sometimes the pain is so unbearable that the brain simply makes it go away with a very deep form of “forgetting.”

However, the trauma does not go away. The pain can infiltrate aspects of life in insidious ways. People cease to trust others, and do not allow themselves to fully and openly love others. They may develop psychosomatic complaints in response to the stress of unresolved trauma. Anger and aggression may become problematic as victims attempt to protect themselves from real and imaginary dangers, over-reacting, pushing people away. At the other extreme, people may become overly passive and subject to continuing abuse at the hands of others. People can become workaholics, or incessantly strive for the acceptance and approval of others. Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, or an unstable sense of self may haunt the person.

While we all recognize the effects of “T” trauma, similar but lesser effects can be observed from smaller or ongoing trauma: living with a highly critical, cold or rejecting parent, a brother or sister that is a bully, or an overly protective parent who cripples our initiative out of fear for our safety. I think that in the future we will recognize that most of our mental health issues are trauma based.

The good news is that we know how to treat trauma—big or small. Treatment involves: recognizing the trauma, recalling, processing and working through it; garnering resources (physical, emotional and spiritual); possibly using medication; sometimes using other treatment modalities to desensitize to the memories; and finally, adjusting to a life without the interference of the pain of the trauma.

It’s hard work but it holds the potential of shifting our lives in profound ways. I love the work I do. I meet with courageous people all day long—people looking into their own lives and souls and bravely facing what is there. The best part is that out of this comes deep and lasting self-love and acceptance. As we learn to love ourselves, we become more loving and caring of others. Just as trauma can have ripple effects though generations, healing can have mighty ripple effects as well. h&h

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