



BY KAREN STEWART, MA

mending broken hearts

Several months ago I had the incredible privilege of looking into my own beating heart. The idea that this little organ, about the size of my fist, was working so hard to pump blood to every part of my body still brings tears to my eyes. Such a miracle. I asked the gentle technician who was performing this test if she loved her job. She said yes that she felt it was a gift to be able to look into a person's beating heart. I feel the same way about my job.

How do we understand this miracle of our heart? How do we integrate our knowledge of this small but powerful physical organ with our sense of our heart as the emotional center of our self? How many of us have suffered literal pain in our hearts when we are feeling grief or longing? When we have been hurt by someone we loved or experienced trauma in any of a number of ways? "Heartache" and "broken heart" are not just metaphorical expressions, they describe the way our physical heart feels when we are suffering.

Many of our most severe heart wounds occur when we are young, our hearts are wide open and we are incredibly vulnerable. Those wounds are the deepest. Physical or sexual abuse and/or neglect by those who are supposed to love us are devastating. Death of a parent or sibling or other traumas in early childhood, racism, and poverty leave wounds that are worked through for a lifetime.

Later wounds can be devastating as well, but if they fall on a relatively healthy heart they can be more easily healed. Later wounds that fall on a heart that has already been wounded compound the old wounds and the effect is even worse. The redeeming

thing is that sometimes the old and new wounds can both be healed. Unfortunately, however, all too many times the wounds merely scab over without real healing.

Ultimately, therapy is about mending broken hearts and the process is analogous to physical healing. The trauma occurs and our heart is broken, filled with terror, rage, and hurt. Our feelings impact our thinking and our thoughts and assumptions become irrational and often highly dysfunctional as we try to understand what has happened to us and why. We search for meanings, blame, cause so that we can avoid future incidents of such pain.

When we are wounded the first thing that happens is that we go numb. People often do not feel the pain of a crushed limb because the body anesthetizes itself, or goes into shock when it is physically overwhelmed. While this is helpful for a time, shock can be life threatening if it persists too long. Psychologically the same thing often occurs. A trauma happens and there might be initial pain, but often numbness takes over and there may even be a sense of peace and calm. The person disassociates from the overwhelming experience and is cushioned from experiencing the full intensity.

Just as with physical shock, it is not good for this state of denial or

continued on page 38

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MINDSET, continued from page 4

disassociation to persist for long.

The first step in healing is cleaning out the wound. Physically this means we take the person to a safe clean space and we wash the wound with an antiseptic solution to clear away debris. This process is often extremely painful. With psychological wounds we allow the pain to be released; this process is called catharsis. It can be extremely painful and it can take what seems to be an unbearably long time. We try to wash away the debris—the dysfunctional thoughts, the self-blame of abuse victims, the guilt of those who have lost a loved one, etc. It takes great courage and strength to face this pain. Many spend their whole lifetime running from it.

With physical trauma, broken bones may have to be repaired, and stitches or surgery may be required. With psychological trauma, relationships may need to be abandoned, life situations may need to be physically changed, and other significant alterations in one's environment may need to be made.

Antibiotics are applied or given orally to protect the physical body from infection. The wound is covered to keep it protected from further dangers. Psychological comfort, soothing, and support are necessary to keep the rage, fear, and terror from infecting all aspects of the victim's life. New ways of thinking and acting may have to be learned, relaxation techniques, bodywork, yoga, and meditation may be helpful.

Then the body uses all this help to heal itself. What a miracle. With support and care, physical and emotional wounds are healed. In therapy, the process is the slow one of reintegrating one's self around this event, not letting the event define the person, but rather having the person ascribe meaning to the event, to learn from it, to be tender and gentle with themselves. Ultimately it means being able to trust and love others, and to live life again to its fullest, while being even more acutely aware of risks than before. While the scars may remain, the body/heart heals and is in the best case, wiser and stronger than before.

I am reminded of the wisdom of Proverbs 4: 23: "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life." We must listen carefully to our hearts, paying close attention to what they reveal. To keep our hearts open in the face of risk and danger requires great courage, but the reward is a full and rich life. **h&h**