



Lexical Priming
Oil on wood
2017
Jessica McGhee

**Stuck and Getting Unstuck:
Pathways through *PTSD***

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Thesis

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This work is dedicated to survivors of
domestic and sexual trauma,
and to the people supporting them
along their path to healing.

Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Trauma is a biological and ‘wordless event.’ (King, 2016, p. 6)

Trauma can often be so debilitating that it changes the context of one’s approach to and interaction with their world. Social anxiety swells, constant worry mounts, thought processes are scattered, hypervigilance reigns, jobs are lost, relationships deteriorate, and isolation presides in a world few can empathize into or understand the multilayered phenomena of. The outward seemingly awkward and irrational behavior of the traumatized individual is highly reactionary and on constant guard. Guarding for unanticipated, unknown, and unimaginable danger(s), this becomes the modus operandi in the attempt to ward off that which has caught the survivor off guard, or unprepared, at one or more points in their personal history. The mind flips a switch deeming hypervigilance a necessary component of survival.

The mind of the survivor with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) is always exhausted and senses it is overexposed to the world. The eyes of the survivor have already seen more than his or her conscious psyche can dissect objectively. Traumatic experiences are compartmentalized, buried, and not *looked at*, whilst the anxiety and hesitations within our neural action patterns heavily fill the days, sights, and all of the decision-making processes. The self-concept becomes a compartmentalized overflowing glass of water which manages stigma, flashbacks, triggers, all while struggling to maintain the appearance of normality.

For full disclosure, it is important to state from the outset, that I know all of this from personal experience. It has been my lived experience, for what I have termed colloquially as “being stuck”, which lends my insider perspective to this writing. Additionally, the research noted within this work includes a thorough analysis of data from studies on the manifestations of PTSD through the individual survivor; first-person narratives; investigations from the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience into the effects of trauma on the memory; and finally, mindfulness principles and the potential of expressive arts therapies as interventions amongst the trees for the necessary healing and getting oneself “unstuck.” I will attempt to define trauma’s ramifications on implicit memory, and why we so very much rely upon our implicit memory. I will also attempt to delineate a safe path away from those ramifications, into a more equanimous life experience; one in which the survivor of PTSD, or complex/ chronic PTSD, can witness the breadth of their own potential as they ascend out of the abyss. Out of the abyss into and within their own greatest good, with full steps toward actualizing that potential through their own explorations and investigations. Concise breakdowns of classic presentations of abuse and PTSD are located in the appendix for further review and reference, as will be additional diagrams and statistics.

Before delving into the processing of memories and physical response, it is first important to define what it means to be *stuck*, and then to understand how this kind of energy stores itself and operates within the body.

“Being stuck” is a term I have coined that can refer to a few different forms of existence when relating it to trauma. One way of “being stuck” is being stuck within a

recurring set of traumatic circumstances, such as intergenerational abuse, this would be considered a complex trauma. A person isolated from their family and friends in a physically and emotionally (and often times sexually and financially) unsafe relationship is also stuck and would be surviving chronic trauma- trauma with multiple diagnoses. A soldier inside of a combat zone is stuck within that desert storm—he or she cannot leave the obscured and otherworldly box; until they are sent home, and when they get home, their life prior to that combat now appears foreign. Often times the veteran cannot yet see they are out of harm's way. The shellshock reigns and the veteran must face very many and very public obstacles while on their way to catharsis and actual freedom; this could also be a chronic trauma, depending on what the soldier has *survived*. A child suffering emotional, physical, and/ or sexual abuse is also, heartbreakingly, stuck in an insecure and distorted understanding of what existence actually is, as they stack on the layers of their childhood, directly into their adulthood. Sometimes the abusive man had an absent father, and an abusive mother. He did not need to receive the abuse his mother had sustained in her youth; yet, sadly, she is trapped in her ways. Intergenerational abuse is a form of complex trauma and complex PTSD, or C-PTSD.

“Being stuck” can also mean reliving additional, compounding traumatic events with each passing day—chronically living within that environment as a constant mode of operations. Day in, day out, through sleep, through wake, through it all. Constant immersion.

Another form of “being stuck” in PTSD is the absence of all ability to fully exercise one’s own free will inside and outside of the above noted unsafe environments. For example, when the little guy is at school, or the abused partner in the toxic relationship is at the grocery store, they are still immersed in the words of their abuser, the verbal/ emotional/ psychological prison denying them their right to freedom and the pursuit of happiness. The hook remains in their neck, their voice unheard, their whole self under the tyrant. Carrying the heavy yet hallowed-out self, carrying the fear of stepping out of bounds, carrying the feared anticipation of past consequences returning, via not... conforming.

It takes great exertion to navigate and present the self along the public aisles of “normalcy”. Maintaining the smile on the face, with tears and despair behind the eyes, for the sake of public decorum; while being crushed under the weight of that massive *secret* shackle.

The abused partner and the abuser must, together, create the impression of the happy and *all-around great* couple/ family next door. The abused partner must simultaneously manage stigma, interpersonal interactions, the reputation of the abuser, and the public interpretation of their personal state of affairs; all while trapped inside a body and mind full of raging despair. This is my attempt to illustrate some of the experiences within and through traumatic experience.

For many, trauma is unfathomable, and the survivor is met with tourism, avoidance or spectacle-like pity from the society they are a part of. Empathy can be very difficult when looking into a horrifying tunnel. The abused keep quiet about their turmoil for fear of consequence, and the judgement of others. They are humiliated and

screaming inside. They are filled with an intense desire to cry out to some other person for help, for some siren to grasp onto, while fearful of the very real and potentially life-threatening consequences those actions could bring.

The survivor does not have to conform! The survivor can manage life without their abuser! The survivor doesn't actually need the abuser... for the survivor has already demonstrated their strength and ability to overcome the abuser, this can be seen clear as day, if they choose to look at the situation without fear. For with every attack, the survivor triumphed. You made it through that! And you faced your abuser again and again, that is bravery! That is courage! That is strength! The abuser's web of deception and need for control cannot sustain itself forever. You are stronger than you know.

When a survivor has managed to step outside of the tidal wave and has become brave enough to talk to other people about the trespasses against them, the other survivors in hiding can navigate a light in the darkness. The outward facing survivors, the sirens, can bring the currently abused masses (for there *are* masses) much hope and inspiration toward an existence outside of that particularly violent, dark and isolated storm. They can be elsewhere, with a completely different understanding of life. The camaraderie between survivors and sirens speak of the communal network, the sight, and the courage one needs to begin sifting the soul/ spirit/ self out of the psychological and physical grips of their abuser.

“Being stuck” is the perpetual contemplation of withdrawing one's self from the immediately unsafe territory they have landed in—and the question of whether or not that space can actually exist. Just as it may be difficult for people who have not

experienced trauma to understand how it functions, some with extensive trauma may find it extremely difficult to understand what life could be like outside of that labor camp. Some trauma victims do not make it out alive—and we honor our fallen martyrs. We occasionally hear of events like these on the evening news, but not at the rate of frequency which truly depicts the very many deaths and waves of suffering.

When a survivor is extricated, and no longer lives within the constant threat of a chronically unsafe space, they can still experience psychological abuse; even for years. There is also the continued threat and fear of some retaliative physical harm; some abusers just have a hard time letting go. They see themselves as the true victim, and need their partner to save them, or the survivor will face some form of consequence; this is how the cycle can repeat itself.

Research on the neurological effects of psychological trauma, thankfully, is beginning to enter public consciousness. Research on PTSD and C-PTSD demonstrates how the body can remain trapped within a recurring set of symptoms, even long after the shackle has been removed- assuming the abuser has lost interest, given up or has been arrested *and* imprisoned (with imprisonment being the *just* consequence for whichever behaviors the abuser chose to present, they chose their behaviors and need receive the consequences which accompany their behavior, otherwise they will learn that that behavior is *acceptable*). If the abuser has left, let go, or is scared away, or if the abuser has been imprisoned, the immediate threat has been removed. In this cycle, when the survivor is away from the immediate threat to their safety, in a safe and protective space, the body still carries an unsecure, fearful and defensive view-set; in addition to the fight-or-flight hormones buried within their body's fatty tissue. A life

lived full of anxiety, flashbacks, and triggers chronically reawaken past traumatic incidents. The constant inability to effectively rest peacefully, constant scanning for danger and a hypersensitivity to potential threats sit at the forefront of the survivor's mind. Immersed PTSD, the survivor also remains in suffering via intrusive nightmares and insomnia, sleep can nourish and replenish the self, and regeneration should be in progress during this time, but the mind must stand watch for danger. Rest fights itself to ensure safety of the corporal self.

This state of being caught up in debilitating cycles long after the trauma applies to both survivors of single-episode traumatic events (such as a single episode of rape or sexual assault, which is defined as any kind of sexual activity you don't consent to and also includes sexual coercion (womenshealth.gov), as well as to survivors of chronic trauma. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder imprisons its carriers within a suffocating cloak of constant fear, an inability to feel safe, sleep interruptions, and the replaying of the traumatic events, and the abuser's voice, over and over and over in the mind's eye and self-talk. This world can seemingly be inhabited by only the survivor, but others are there. The isolation need not continue. Everyone and everything else have been rendered foreign, a reintroduction to their world is now afoot. This day can be open, and limitless. There is no need to walk alone.

Consequently, this thesis will address Trauma, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Complex PTSD, and Chronic PTSD. Survivors of sexual and domestic violence will be the primary survivor groups of focus, though this does not mean I place these survivor groups above other groups of survivors. All survivors are legitimate and worthy of the highest respects, your pedestal is very well deserved. Own that. Catharsis vehicles included in this research, which can be assistive to all, will include Expressive Arts Therapy, Meditation and Mindfulness practices, and the purely amazing impact of Nature upon the psyche. Nature is our innate home, we should all take this into consideration, every person. Neurobiological studies in each of these areas will support my findings, conclusion, and recommendations.

Engaging the physical body remains a principal vehicle for learning, and this can be achieved through many forms of meditation (Beilock, 2015). While addressing PTSD, we might choose to involve meditative practices which consider more embodied aspects of our being, utilizing yoga or Tai Chi for example. When practicing meditative movement within a group, we are moving, learning new forms of physical dialogue and expression within our physical self. Starting a new conversation within the muscle memory, and leaving the toxic one behind. Many forms of meditation are conducive to reaching a higher cognitive space; and sharing that journey with another survivor can greaten the catharsis sustained, on both the physical and psychological levels. As a species, we rely on one another to live; that's how we made it this far.

My research is driven by this question: How can we, as a creative community, come together to help mitigate the damage sustained by the survivors of trauma in our local villages, towns, and cities?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Typical Neurological Function

There are two different kinds of memory—explicit (conscious) memory and implicit (unconscious) memory. Explicit memory deals with declarative events and episodic events. Working memory is a part of the explicit memory system, which manages the episodic and semantic memory. Declarative events are the semantics of memories, the raw and cold facts of what color your socks are to what you need to pick up from the grocery store before dinner. Episodic events are more *feeling-toned*, like the smell of freshly baked cookies or hugs from a loved one. Implicit memory manages a much broader realm than explicit memory. Implicit memories manage the emotion attached to our previous experiences. They are more implicit in that they hold the feeling and contextual meaning behind our experiences, arising “as a collage of sensations, emotions and behaviors” (Levine, 2017, audiobook) based on previous experience in similar situations and environments. This is part of how our action potentials strengthen our neural pathways, and how we build associations and learn to display ourselves in differing situations, for example, learning how to read a room.

Implicit memory determines our procedural actions and behavior in our everyday existence, such as blinking of the eyes, beating of the heart, in addition to behavior and emotional response, such as in routine interactions, new experiences (e.g., a new job or trip to somewhere one has never been), a recurring uncomfortable or bothersome experience, preferred activities, and behavior in emergency situations. Our implicit memory manages our emotional and procedural memory. It guides our body and behavior throughout our days, and the many

different kinds of situations and interactions we experience and can experience. Our implicit memory primarily functions within the realm of our unconscious.

The function of emotional memory is to flag and encode important experiences for immediate and potent reference later on... while emotional memories are flags, procedural memories are the impulses, movements, and internal body sensations that guide us through the how-to of our various actions, skills, attractions and repulsions. (Levine, 2017, audiobook)

Procedural memory also holds the action patterns for how the body will instinctually respond to emergency situations with actions such as bracing, screaming, the fight-or-flight-or-freeze responses, and the setting and maintenance of territorial boundaries. These responses then inform the fundamental organismic part of procedural memory how to proceed and are crucial to how the memories of traumatic events are consolidated (Levine, 2017). If you think back to a threatening or potentially threatening event, it is almost as if one's memory photographically recalls snippets of very specific moments within a threatening event, almost as with a highlighter, the scene laying itself out in the mind very loudly. Retaining this kind of information was key to our survival evolutionarily. Based upon these memories we can determine whether to approach or avoid something we were attracted to or repulsed by. Some people call this their 'gut feeling,' hence the common saying 'trust your gut' or 'go with your gut,' it won't steer you wrong. We seek out that which we can thrive upon, such as sweet fruit, clean water and our tribe—and we avoid, or are repulsed by, that which can make us ill or cause us harm, such as excrement, large carnivorous animals, or strangers encroaching upon our established territory (strangers being defined here as those we know little about and cannot easily predict the behavior of).

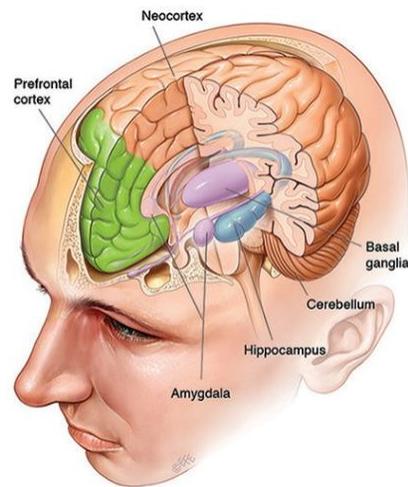


Fig. 1: Prefrontal Cortex

Retrieved from: <https://www.quora.com/In-which-part-of-the-brain-do-we-store-all-of-our-memories-and-is-it-possible-to-erase-them>

The hippocampus is responsible for consolidating experiences into memory. “The hippocampus coordinates the activity of the different cortical areas (which, at this point, are not yet connected in the cortex). The major mechanism of consolidation is reactivation, a process in which the hippocampus replays the neural activity associated with a memory” (Goldstein, 2014, p. 195). This is an important process because it informs the implicit memory on which actions, behaviors and feelings are appropriate for each type of experience. According to Goldstein (2014), during the reactivation of a memory, “activity occurs in the network connecting the hippocampus and the cortex, and this activity helps form direct connections between the various cortical areas” (p. 195). When experiencing certain situations routinely, family dinners for example, the implicit memory can rely on these well-traveled emotional pathways for feeling and response in these situations. The brain codes experiences so it may defer to previous similar experiences. Personal habits are a strong example of this process, as are set action patterns such as getting in your car and starting the engine before attempting to put the

car into reverse or drive. These are the superhighways we build to navigate where we are going and how we get there, based on previous experiences. “This way of looking at the cortex pictures the hippocampus acting like a ‘glue’ that binds together the representations of memory from different cortical areas” (Goldstein, 2014, p. 195). Emotionally encoded memories allow you to think: Don’t eat Aunt Mae’s apple pie because she licks the spoon at every turn, but you better bring a to-go container to Grandpa Jim’s house or you’ll regret it tomorrow, and the day after!

We, as a species, evolved to rely on one another because it was the surest way to advance the human species. Our brain houses a reward system for effectively communicating with and loving other people. When we are isolated, or feel isolated, we suffer chemical consequences within our brain which heighten our notions of being alone. Loneliness has proven to be physiologically and emotionally detrimental to our well-being (Cherry, 2018). We sustain these consequences because, evolutionarily, we would not survive if we were alone. Our survival relied upon our need to need one another, hinging our evolution as a species upon our relationships was the key determinant for our evolutionary progress. For the survival of our relationships and, ultimately, our species, we developed multiple methods for us to read our surroundings and *our* social collective *within* our current surroundings.

The neurochemistry in the striatum, the part of the brain which “detects emotional and sensory motor conditions” (Wurzman, 2017) has evolved to socially link us to one another with chemical signals ranging from oxytocin and naturally occurring opioids. This is our in-house reward system for loving and caring for one another. Loneliness causes a lack of oxytocin and opioid release, and has been linked with depression, suicide, cardiovascular disease, stroke, increased stress and cortisol levels, decreased memory and learning, poor decision making

alcoholism, drug abuse, the progression of Alzheimer's Disease, altered brain function and "the regulation of cellular processes deep within the body, predisposing us to premature aging" (Center for Treatment of Anxiety and Mood Disorders, 2017, p. 2). These are the consequences we sustain when we detach from our safety net, our tribe. Human beings *had* to need each other and want to keep one another near, or it would literally hurt. This is where empathy reaches out for us and connects us together as another form of security.

People are capable of empathizing is via our facial expressions; this is possible because of mirror neurons. Mirror neurons attempt to mirror the emotions the people around us are experiencing via reading the face, being able to determine a mood or reaction of a fellow human was also a necessary evolutionary ability (Beilock, 2015). Since we as humans needed one another to survive, we also needed to know how we made each other feel, and how to keep our social collective happy with our actions so they would keep us in their tribe. Our feelings are written all over all of our faces. We literally read one another; sometimes we may be wrong, but oftentimes we just read others' emotions and reactions and determine whether our behavior is appropriate. We need one another, sometimes more often than we would like to admit. When we set on journeys together, we rely upon one another, we build memories, together. We tell one another our stories; we commiserate upon wrongs done against us. We build trust together. We build tribes together (Wright, 2017).

The Default Mode Network is a part of episodic memory formation and attention. It manages our behavior when we are not focused within a specific activity. Studies have also shown that the more the Default Mode Network (DMN) manages, the more subject we are to anxiety, depression, cyclical ruminations, and addictive behaviors. In review of our environment "the striatum detects emotional and sensory motor conditions, it triggers and

[when it triggers] it knows to trigger whatever behavior you have done most often in the past under those same conditions” (Wurzman, 2017). The brain’s default operating mode ruminates on past events and future possibilities, in preparation for what may come next. Unfortunately, this draws attention and appreciation away from the present moment.

Nonregulation of mindspace when the mind is not directly engaged in an occupying activity lays the mind subject to wandering and rumination over past or potential future events (Beilock, 2015). The mind is always scanning for potential danger, evolutionarily, this is how we survived as a species (Wright, 2017) and why we are able to see that distant spider moving on the other side of the room so efficiently or knew which tree was the best choice to climb in the event a pack of wolves came looking for their next meal. But, in dangerous situations, “whenever your attention is dramatically captured by stressful situations, your thinking changes. Neurons go into crisis mode, neural areas involved focus attention, buckle down, and stop communicating effectively with the rest of the brain. This makes it hard for different areas of the brain, those involved in logic, memory, or attention, to work together to help us function at our best” (Beilock, 2015). So what does this say about how we function in crisis? We do the best we can with what we have. When we are a part of a group, we survive more efficiently, are happier overall and less stressed, which then feeds into other areas of productivity.

Whenever we are learning we are also creating new neural pathways (Goldstein, 2015). When we are learning with others, we also get that hormonal input which places *value* in the context of the community we are learning with (Beilock, 2015). When we learn as a group, we are rewarded in two ways, via new neural pathways formed in mind, and hormonal feedback received through meaningful relationships (Wurzman, 2017). Physical movement also helps us learn and remember as we get ourselves unstuck because it aligns another form of memory—

muscle memory—with a moment (Beilock, 2015). If we combine movement within a practice, along with community while forming new mental pathways, we multifold rewards.

Traumatized Neurological Dysfunction

A traumatic event is characterized by a level of terror or horror triggered as a response to a horrifying or terrorizing event which poses a very real or perceived threat of either serious injury or death. Helplessness is also a key feeling triggered by trauma. To become afflicted with trauma, the event does not even need to happen to the survivor(s) directly. A witness to a violent crime or attack can also be traumatized. Take a moment and think back to our capacity for empathy—we need empathy to survive. In an even more so frightening context, a child who witnesses domestic violence between their parents can also be traumatized during that event (or series of events), causing preverbal trauma and an interruption in the developmental processes (King, 2016, p. 68). A witness of a lethal car accident can also be traumatized, as well as first responders.

There are three main types of trauma: acute, chronic and complex. Acute trauma is a result of a single episode event, such as a violent rape by a person unknown to the survivor; it is also typically a more recent event, one that occurs and generates symptoms within the past few months. Chronic trauma is sustained in situations where the trauma is cyclical and happens over time, or is repeated over and over in some form, such as with the cycle of intimate partner violence in an ongoing relationship or repeated childhood sexual abuse. Complex trauma is characterized via *multiple* forms of exposure to acute and/ or chronic trauma spanning over a long period of time, such as a survivor of an intimate partner violence relationship involving physical and/ or emotional abuse, in addition to experiencing domestic violence as a child; or a

child living in a war zone bearing witness to the casualties of and breakdown of their home; or a combat veteran who suffers combat-related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and is also sexually assaulted while serving (by enemy or fellow soldier); or a child who witnesses domestic violence between their primary caregivers, and also suffers physical and/ or sexual trauma within their formative years. Trauma sustained during the formative years can cause significant to severe developmental delays and developmental shutdown.

PTSD is a completely different experiential world than the one most people exist in. For one, common logic does not prevail within the typical day-to-day existence. Whether at home, out in public, or at work, safety cannot be *fully* assured because all conceptions of safety and well-being are breached. Cortisol levels remain hyper-vigilant, anxiety and compulsive rumination consumes the thought processes of the individual who is stuck in the vortex of PTSD. Hyper-arousal and intrusive memories trap the survivor in a toxic cycle, locking them within a prison of their emotions. As noted earlier, the implicit memory manages our emotional response and procedural behavior. Hyper-arousal and intrusive memories are a by-product of the extreme emotions experienced during the traumatic event, which needs to remain vigilant to prevent sustaining further trauma.

From an evolutionary standpoint, we needed very clear messaging (emotional response) from the procedural memory on what was required to ensure survival, thus the burning persistence of intrusive memories and hyper-arousal of the emotions. For a person who is a recent survivor of trauma, or has sustained multiple kinds of trauma throughout their lives, navigating the ins and outs of non-threatening situations can be somewhat unclear at times. “Feelings originate at the deepest levels of the brainstem, rather than the cerebral cortex. This is so important to understand because traumatized people are terrified of what’s going on inside of

them,” (Levine, 2017, audiobook). With one foot in actuality and the other trapped in cyclical ruminations of flashbacks and emotional hyper-arousal, living with PTSD can be emotionally exhausting and causes additional problems such as memory difficulties, avoidance, exaggerated startle response, severe anxiety, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, emotional detachment/numbing.

PTSD is the result of the physical and emotional response of traumatic stimuli presented to the psyche. There are three main forms of PTSD, which correlate to the three different aforementioned kinds of trauma. The symptoms of Acute Stress Disorder can set in immediately or several weeks after the event and last a few months up to about one year. The symptoms of Chronic Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can remain for months or even years after the traumatic event. The symptoms of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are experienced under conditions of sustained, long term, ritual abuse, such as Intergenerational Abuse or Intimate Partner Violence within a marriage or domestic partnership. The symptoms of Complex PTSD can impact an individual’s entire life span.

During the implicit memory’s attempts to deal with the intolerable content of the trauma that has been experienced, the symptoms of PTSD can emerge. These symptoms can last weeks, months, and even years. Symptoms of PTSD fall into three categories, which may or may not work in tandem with one another—the mind will be triggered to repeatedly re-live, avoid, and/or focus on situations sensed, perceived, or otherwise marked as similar to the traumatizing event with increased alarm. The mind may also be triggered to re-live the initial traumatizing event via flashbacks and nightmares, which often include extreme emotional and physical reactions to any reminders of the event. Emotional reactions can include guilt, shame, extreme fear of harm, and a numbing of emotions. Physical reactions can include uncontrollable shaking,

chills or heart palpitations, and tension headaches. Symptoms of avoidance include staying away from activities, places, thoughts, or feelings related to the trauma or feeling detached or estranged from others. Symptoms of increased arousal include being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability or outbursts of anger, and lack of concentration. Other symptoms linked with PTSD include: panic attacks, depression, suicidal thought and feelings, drug abuse, feelings of being estranged and isolated, and not being able to complete daily tasks (National Institutes of Mental Health, 2016).

Symptoms of PTSD can interrupt typical daily function, relationships with loved ones, and can cause the survivor to lose their job, which then often then triggers the further consequence of plummeting the survivor into poverty—yet another form of sustained trauma due to the loss of the ability to survive from day to day and meet the everyday financial demands, which is not a primary concern among those with a steady job and income (Beilock, 2015).

While Chronic PTSD results from one or two occurrences an acute trauma, symptoms persist up to a few months, perhaps even a year, but usually fade. Complex PTSD and its related dissociative disorders can last a lifetime and come after exposure to long term trauma, such as systemic child abuse, involving emotional, psychological, and/or sexual abuse. It is often the case that children from abusive homes experience Complex PTSD because they were not yet developmentally able to process the traumatic events they were exposed in ways that an adult might have been able to. Consequently, their notions of a *safe space* do not exist within their immediate home and family. A typical child in a situation they can thrive, without emotional abuse, is free to blossom in their formative years. Children require a safe, open and compassionate home during their formative years. Traumatized children are not free to express

their feelings and deal with notions of healthy interaction—their minds and bodies cannot frolic freely in childhood, bound as they are bound by the constricting fears which have permeated daily existence. Their journey towards a healthy self-concept, respect for their own needs, and an undistorted understanding of the world around them has been stymied. This long-term functioning in crisis mode stemming from childhood interrupts their psychological and neurologic development, thus causing lifelong struggles with proper emotional self-regulation, difficulty with self-perception, interruptions in consciousness, difficulty with relationships, and intense feelings of irreparability.

Amid all of this, inflammatory triggers and nightmares keep the body in heightened alert modes and unable to consolidate intolerable memories (Levine, 2012). The lack of adequate sleep causes future memory problems, dissociation, and irritability. Additional delayed problems are grief, shame, emotional detachment, anxiety, and feelings of fragility/vulnerability. The body begins to walk through life in hyper arousal with elevated cortisol levels, appetite and digestive disruption, a lowered immune-response, and fatigue. Long term this can lead to heart and autoimmune diseases. (Levine, 2012). This chaos going on within the body can lead to difficulty making decisions and functioning within the day to day, consistent preoccupation with the traumatic event(s) and intense notions of isolation. Socio-emotional relationships can and often are interrupted via this chaos. So, in addition to these many impacts, hormonal balance is shifted further and isolation is magnified (Levine, 2012).

When someone feels they cannot be understood because they have seen the world as something that burns them, it is very difficult to relate to others who have not also sensed this form of existence. It's just too much for people who have not experienced similar realities to process, as noted earlier, it is also too much for the traumatized person to process. But living in trauma's wake is the only option for those subjected to its flames.

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The cycles of avoidance and hypervigilance can manifest in so many much more horrifying ways. While trying to process content too traumatic for the mind to process, responses to feeling overwhelmed can shutter one inside their own doors, leaving only out of necessity, or responses to not feeling can thrust someone into highly unsafe behaviors, potentially walking directly into more trauma. Substance Abuse so often is used as a tool for self-medication, that budding addiction and can ultimately become the decision-making proxy of that sufferer's existence.

Among the survivors of trauma, maintaining an appropriate level of attention and focus is an immensely difficult task, requiring high levels of executive control almost constantly throughout the day (Beilock, 2015). Managing an array of unexpected triggers and flashbacks throughout the typical everyday exercises of engagement with people at work, school, or play requires learning to maintain control over the mind's wanderings in ways that provide benefit, calm, ease of mind, and resilience throughout commonplace day-to-day events. To aid this self-management be accomplished, trauma-informed therapy becomes key, since any isolated sufferer who walks into a therapy office and senses the therapist cannot actually empathize with or interpret what they are dealing with on an everyday basis, can begin to feel like a spectacle. Trauma-informed therapy helps a survivor to exit the path of thinking they are alone. Though functioning within isolation appears to the survivor as the only way they can safely walk through the world, group therapy with a community of survivors can significantly alter the loneliness of the individual's journey. When a survivor encounters another survivor with a similar story, a safe space for new identity and community can be generated between them. The emergence of new identity and community is vital since life will never return to what it was prior to the traumatic event, and altering or reassigning the memory the past trauma is

unrealistic—we cannot pretend we reacted to the trauma in a different way; we cannot pretend the situation was resolved in a different manner. Those who try to pretend, remain stuck.

In neurologic studies of women exposed to chronic physical and sexual trauma in their youth, it was found that they had “a 19% smaller hippocampal volume relative to women without abuse or PTSD. These results [were] consistent with deficits in hippocampal function and structure in abuse-related PTSD” (Goldstein, 2014, p. 195). The hippocampus, a part of the brain associated with the formation of lasting memories, also functions more effectively with adequate sleep, and sleep is often difficult when impeded by the interruptions triggered by trauma.

For someone who’s living “it” every day, PTSD can be a daunting and exhaustive juggling act. PTSD interferes with executive function, decreasing memory consolidation via the hippocampal response, causing inability to rest due to interrupted sleep patterns when implicit (unconscious, procedural) memory is trying to deal with what the explicit (conscious) memory cannot bear to sense or experience. In the midst of all this, the survivor experiences waves of good days and bad days—some laden with triggers and flashbacks; some days with no triggers and no flashbacks, but rather unexplained heart palpitations; and other days weighted with pure and simple exhaustion or dissociation.

Within moments of the perpetration of traumatic experiences inflicted by another person (e.g., rape or ritual abuse), the initial response of the individual psyche is scattered amongst feelings of numbness and detachment, fear and severe fear, anger, disorientation, helplessness and denial. Immediate physical responses include sweating, rapid heartbeat, body tremors, and gastrointestinal distress. Rumination over the violation and distortion of time also settle in while

the mind tries to protect itself from additional harm, and mind partitions off those memories it cannot tolerate (SAMHSA, 2014).

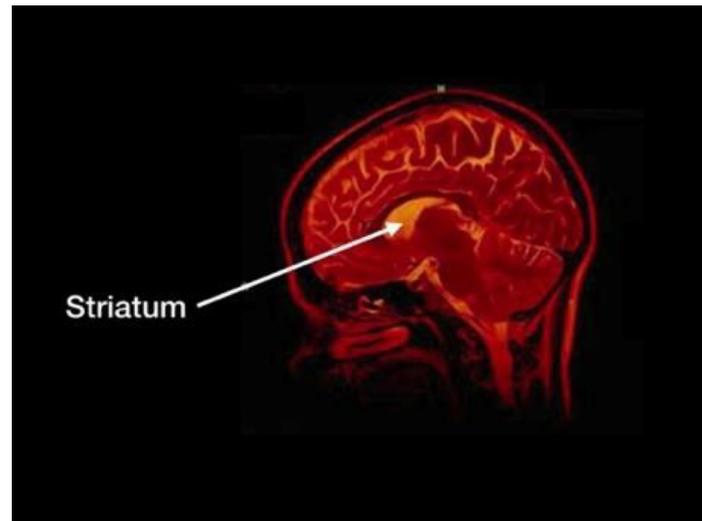


Fig. 2: Striatum (Wurzman, 2017, 5:34)

In order to change the recurring experience of trauma via cyclical reactivation of traumatic memory, which causes the survivor to re-live the traumatic event over and over again, new experiences need to be encoded into the explicit and implicit memory systems. New *positive* experiences. *Rewarding* experiences. This is where the hormone-regulated reward system comes into play. Studies of isolation have proven to be heavily detrimental to physical and mental well-being. “The striatum detects emotional and sensory motor conditions, and it triggers and it knows to trigger whatever behavior you have done most often in the past under those same conditions” (Wurzman, 2017, 5:36).

How does one navigate release from this prison of the implicit memory’s cry for help?
How can the conscious operating systems reach out to soothe and nourish the unconscious

operating systems? Where is the bridge between explicit and implicit memory, and how can we significantly shift the physical and emotional response to PTSD? What does this mean for the person inside of the grasp of a state of recurring trauma—and when, finally, beyond its literal grasp? What can we do when the trauma has passed, is no longer present in the current moment? Redefining the self in this space is crucial to overcoming the process of the implicit memory's persistent hyperarousal and hypervigilance. There is a need for the re-organization of the nervous system to overcome the trauma. But what does this mean?

Statistical Data from Trauma Studies

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence describes domestic violence as “the willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior as part of a systematic pattern of power and control perpetrated by one intimate partner against another. It includes physical violence, sexual violence, threats, and emotional abuse. The frequency and severity of domestic violence can vary dramatically” (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2015).

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is an insidious snake which preys upon a lack of understanding of its dynamics by most individuals and the amount of self-worth one carries. It is a poison which can trickle down through generations and infect familial blood lines via the willful neglect of teaching youth how to love and be loved, and a distorted approach to for conveying how to treat people and what is acceptable treatment from others. Domestic Violence is comprised of a blend of a variety of behaviors, most often beginning with emotional and psychological abuse. Wikipedia, a widely known and popular reference website, describes emotional abuse as inclusive of verbal abuse and constant criticism, but also of more subtle

tactics such as forced isolation, intimidation, and multiple forms of manipulation generally following the pattern of: 1) aggression; 2) denying/ withholding affection and resources; and 3) minimizing the impact of harmful behaviors.

Aggressive behavior may involve regularly making threats of physical harm either toward the self or the abused; capricious or incalculable behavior; language used in an insulting, degrading, terrorizing, isolating, and/ or exploitative manner; in addition to the denial that such actions ever happened at all. Wikipedia also references author, attorney, and former sex crimes investigator Andrew Vachss, who defined emotional abuse as “the systematic diminishment of another.” Denying and withholding are very closely related birds because they tend to travel together, darting in and out of sight, obscuring one another’s obscured presence as the perpetrator refuses to even acknowledge actual truths and past real experiences. If the victim is living within an isolated context, this poison can travel deep within the soul leading to the systematic atrophy of their self-concept and independence as a human being (Wikipedia). The victim will suffer through anxiety, depression and, oftentimes, PTSD as a result of this emotional and psychological abuse.



Fig 3: American Addiction Centers, 2019

Emotional and psychological abuse is rooted in the exertion of power and control over another person while utilizing manipulation, name-calling, shaming, dismissiveness, hyper-critical judgements, and brainwashing as tools over time. Living in such a climate causes the victim to second-guess all of their abilities, eating away at their independence and self-confidence. It builds walls of isolation around the abused and brainwashes the abused into feelings of inadequacy, shame, and guilt. It can exacerbate a climate of sexual coercion, placing the abused in the position of being exploited as an objectified possession.

This is all done very strategically, but, simultaneously may also be the primary reality the abuser understands, perhaps conscious only of their own overwhelming pains and their desperate search for that perfect person to fill the gaping hole in their lives and *love* them out of pain. The abuser loves like this because it is how they learned to exist and love. But it is possible that incrementally, through levels of exposure to education and therapeutic intervention, that the abuser may come to conceive the damage they are wreaking upon their “savior” partner.

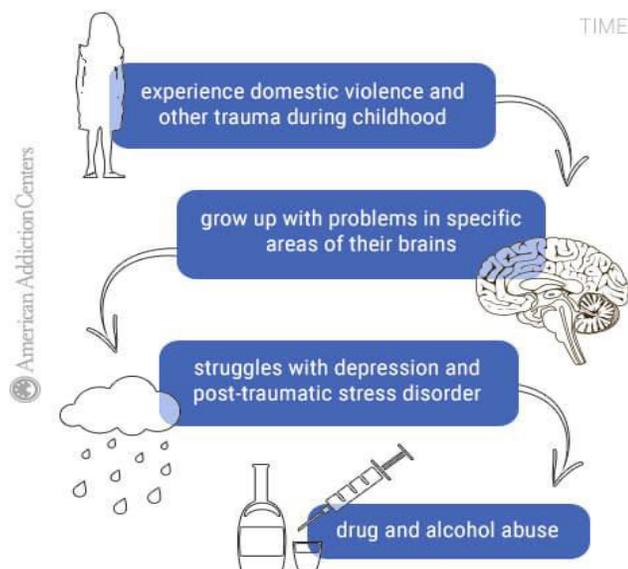


Fig. 4: American Addiction Centers, 2019

In holding in all of these pains, the abused (and abuser) often seek out ways of making the pain dissipate. Self-medicating often accompanies one or both partners in a toxic relationship, it is also common for the numbing effects of self-medicating to lay an addictive hold onto the user. This is why addressing the mind and body together, as a cohesive unit through and through, is key to plucking quills which cannot consistently be consciously sensed.

Without a physical intervention to pains felt throughout the body on such a fundamental level, how can catharsis expect to be wholly achieved? According to the American Addiction Centers website, the U.S. Department of Justice has detailed the parameters for what domestic violence is and what it looks like. This kind of information doesn't always reach everyone, and oftentimes the abused remains within the relationship thinking the situation is their fault. Abusers often use psychological abuse to keep the abused within their grasps. These definitions are definitely public, but they can't reach all corners of society, which can also be said regarding many other topics. In raising awareness, we need to fully understand the subtle differences between controlling and brainwashing behaviors. versus a healthy disagreement. The notions of physical abuse, though seemingly obvious, can sometimes be written off if the assault seems not worthy of making a big deal out of in the mind of the abused. In fact, many abusers will accuse the abused of making a big deal out of an incident as another form of control, accusing the abused of being overdramatic. As a unified public, we need to hear this truth and speak it out into those dark quiet corners.

The U.S. Department of Justice explains that the abuse in a domestic arrangement is not limited to physical acts, such as hitting, punching, slapping or pulling hair; 'domestic violence,'

as a legal term, can also cover sexual abuse (rape, marital rape, treating a partner in a sexually abusive and demeaning way, and molestation), emotional abuse (intentional malicious attacks on a partner's self-worth), and psychological abuse (controlling the partner, blackmail, threatening to harm children, violence towards pets, and intimidation). (American Addiction Centers, 2019)

Sexual coercion in a relationship is also sexual abuse, no means no behind all doors. Domestic violence and intimate partner violence includes: the use of emotional and psychological abuse; physical abuse; intimate partner sexual violence (such as sexual coercion, marital rape and drug-facilitated rape and sexual assault); reproductive coercion and violations of pregnancy protections; intimidation; isolation; economic abuse and the destroying or trashing of the victim's personal property; and the intergenerational perpetuation of child abuse (American Addiction Centers, 2019).

Domestic Violence tangibly manifests itself through:

- physical violence
- sexual violence
- destruction of property within the household
- pressure to dress in a certain way, wear one's hair in a certain way
- financial abuse, limiting or disallowing the abused access to money, transportation, a phone, taking the abused person's earnings ,or not allowing the abused to have/ keep a job

Intangible manifestations of abuse are experienced as:

- coercion to talk/ behave/ act in a particular way
- exploitation

- public and private humiliations, used to frame the victim in a particularly demeaning light
- limiting exposure to social media, public spaces, people, friends and loved ones via intimidation, coercion, or force
- manipulation with progressively extreme presentations of jealousy
- accusations of the abused taking the future position of abandonment/ betrayal of the abuser (as another means of loyalty control and imprisonment)
- The abuser also often uses their own damaged past to paint a sense of innocence of self and a dire need for the abused to stay and help the abuser survive their pains.
- Last but not least, threats of violence and/or death of the abused and/ or their children the abused party(ies) were ever to try to leave, including threats of suicide by the abuser if the abused person were to try to leave.

Initially, in a toxic relationship, the abuser may appear to be very well put together, is often charismatic, very loyal, and creates a sense of destined love within the context of their relationship. They are the only two people in the whole of the universe. These are very classic presentations of the grandeur placed upon the victim at the onset of the relationship. As time progresses and the love bonds stronger, what once seemed to be an unwavering adoration and perfect love escalates to manipulative control and can progress to intermittent moments of explosive disapproval for a simple, harmless action by the victim. This is called conditioning. As time continues to move forward, the love becomes more codependent, and the gradual conditioning for the abused to accept abuse as “normal” secures its coils around the victim. Moments of actual physical violence may or may not spearhead, and if an incident does occur, a significant amount of time may pass subsequent to the first instance of physical abuse. A “lack of

physical violence does not [necessarily] mean the abuser is any less dangerous to the victim, nor does it mean the victim is any less trapped by the abuse” (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2015). This form of control sends the abused into a realm of constantly unstable ground, ever walking on quicksand and eggshells as their well-being is now dependent upon the whims of the abuser’s mood. They go on to exist living in fear for an indefinite amount of time, living life crisis to crisis.

Survivors often leave their abusers several times before finally being able to fully detach. But the victim also has not yet reached safety at the severing or escape of the relationship, as the abuser has a heightened sense of a lack of control after the abused escapes the grasp of the abuser. “In fact, the victim is often in the most danger directly following the escape of the relationship or when they seek help: 1/5 of homicide victims with restraining orders are murdered within two days of obtaining the order; 1/3 are murdered within the first month,’ (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2015).



Fig. 5: Peggie Reyna, Unconventional Apology Project, Chantal Barlow, ND

Some victims of abuse end up staying for far too long, living in constant fear. Peggie Reyna was interviewed by Chantal Barlow's *Unconventional Apology Project*, a socially engaged dialogic art project combining the use of photography and interviews to create a public platform for survivors to share their experiences. While Peggie survived two domestically violent marriages, because of her daughter's distorted perspective of how a woman was to be subjugated and victimized by an abusive man, her daughter followed in her mother's footsteps. After Peggie was almost killed by her second husband, she finally got out and eventually joined the staff at a local domestic violence shelter. Peggie tried desperately for years to pull her daughter out of her violent marriage, but her daughter did not survive as her abuser, Peggie's son-in-law "put a gun to her head and he killed her." Peggie goes on to say in her interview that, "I think it's so important to know that domestic violence is intergenerational. That it comes not only from learned behavior, but from learned acceptance to how other people treat you. That if you grow up in a home where you see your mother accept that someone beats her up, punches her in the face, kicks her in the stomach, throws her across the room... she gets up and cleans up the blood and cooks dinner and makes love to him. That what you learn is that that's an acceptable way to do relationships...but it's not." (Unconventional Apology Project, ND).

Vera House, a domestic violence shelter in Syracuse, NY, puts out an annual report on "Domestic and Sexual Violence in the Greater Syracuse Area" each year. Their latest report, published October 5, 2018 in the *Syracuse Post-Standard*, listed the following statistics related to Syracuse and Onondaga County:

- Syracuse Police Department answered 10,180 domestic-related calls in 2017, down slightly from 10,963 in 2016.

- Other police agencies, including the Onondaga County Sheriff's Office, New York State Police and town and village police answered 6,839 domestic calls in 2017, up from 6,696 in 2016.
- Syracuse Police Department made 1,778 domestic violence-related arrests in 2017 and 76 sex offense-related arrests.
- Other police agencies in the county arrested 1,586 domestic violence-related arrests and 87 sexual offense-related arrests.
- Vera House's Advocacy Program served 1,860 victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and elder abuse
- The 2017 District Attorney's Special Victims Bureau prosecutions resulted in 671 felony arrests and 200 misdemeanor arrests between partners or ex-partners
- 64 felony arrests and 14 misdemeanors arrests for child sexual abuse
- 16 felony arrests and 12 misdemeanors arrests for adult sexual assault
- City Court Bureau prosecuted 600 felony arrests and 12 misdemeanor arrests for adult sexual assault.
- There were two intimate partner violence-related homicides Onondaga County in 2018, and one in 2017.

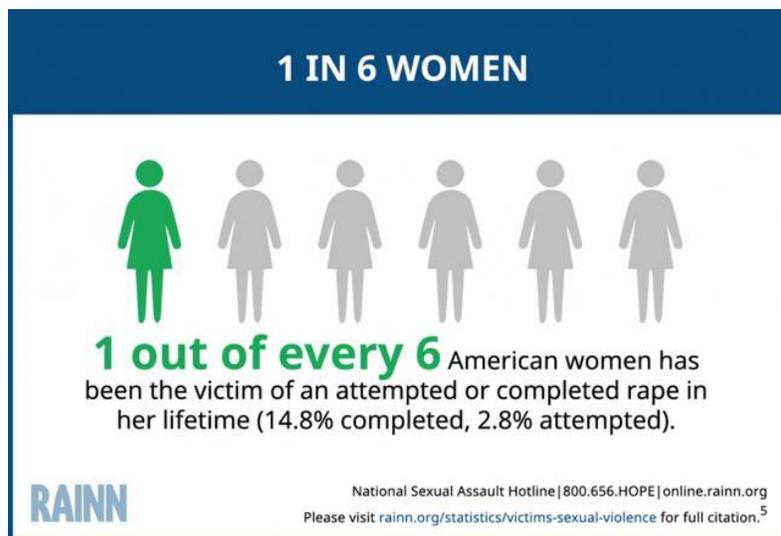


Fig. 6: Sexual Violence Statistics; Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), 2019

Sexual violence, the other form of trauma of focus within this thesis, includes sexual assault; non-stranger rape; stranger rape; multiple perpetrator sexual assault and rape; child sexual abuse; sexual assault of persons with disabilities; sexual assault of men and boys; military sexual trauma; intimate partner sexual violence; incest (rape via a parent, family member or close family friend); drug-facilitated rape & sexual assault; and sex trafficking. The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN, 2019) reports that millions of women in the United States have experienced rape and that young women are “especially at risk.”

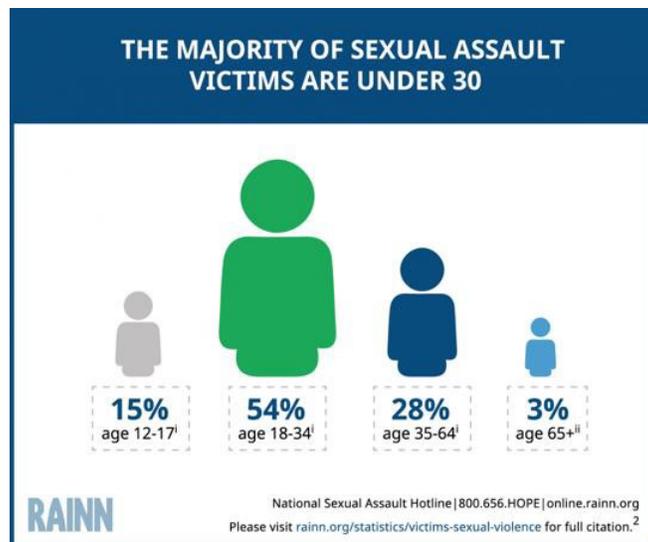


Fig. 7: Sexual Violence Statistics, RAINN, 2019

RAINN also reports that:

- Every 98 seconds an American is sexually assaulted; that, on average, there are 321,500 victims, aged 12 or older, of rape and sexual assault each year.
- 82% of all juvenile victims are female. 90% of adult victims are female.
- Females age 16-19 are 4 times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault.
- Women ages 18-24 who are college students are 3 times more likely than women in general to experience sexual violence. Women, who are not enrolled in college, of the same age range are 4 times more likely.
- About 3% of American Men have experienced an attempted or completed rape, 1 in every 33.

- 21% of TGQN (Transgender, Genderqueer, Nonconforming) college students have been sexually assaulted, compared to 18% of non-TGNQ females and 4% of non-TGNQ males.
- 94% of women who are raped experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during the two weeks following the rape. (This is classified as Acute PTSD)
- 30% of women report symptoms of PTSD 9 months after the rape. (This is classified as Chronic PTSD.)
- 33% of women raped contemplate suicide
- 13% of women raped attempt suicide
- Approx. 70% of rape or sexual assault victims experience moderate to severe distress, a larger percentage for any other violent crime.
- 38% of victims of sexual violence experience work or school problems, which can include significant problems with a boss, coworker, or peer.
- 37% experience family/friend problems, including getting into arguments more frequently than before, not feeling able to trust their family/friends, or not feeling as close to them as before the crime.
- 84% of survivors who were victimized by an intimate partner experience professional or emotional issues, including moderate to severe distress, or increased problems at work or school.
- 79% of survivors who were victimized by a family member, close friend or acquaintance experience professional or emotional issues, including moderate to severe distress, or increased problems at work or school.
- 67% of survivors who were victimized by a stranger experience professional or emotional issues, including moderate to severe distress, or increased problems at work or school.



Fig. 8: "Abused Goddesses," Taproot, India, 2010

The advertising agency Taproot in India created the above pictured ad campaign to draw attention to domestic violence and sex trafficking within India. The works recreate art of sacred Hindu goddesses to mirror the trauma experienced by 68% of women in India (Actipedia, 2019). According to the National Institute of Mental Health, many survivors of trauma are at risk for developing Post traumatic Stress Disorder, not all survivors do. Resilience factors can help reduce the chances for PTSD. Resilience and risk factors vary from person to person and may or may not be present prior to sustaining the trauma. Risk factors for developing PTSD include living through dangerous events and traumas; getting injured; witnessing other people getting hurt or killed; childhood trauma; being in situations which cause feelings of horror, helplessness, or extreme fear; having little or no support after a traumatic event(s); or being exposed to extra/excess stress after the traumatic event, such as loss of a loved one, pain and injury, or loss of a job/ home. Having a history of mental illness or substance abuse also causes a higher risk of developing PTSD.

Many survivors experience immense difficulty while existing through this cycle, and often resort to self-medicating. Self-medicating is the use of tobacco, alcohol, prescription and/or illicit drugs as a coping mechanism. While self-medication can temporarily dull sensations, it ultimately intensifies the symptoms of isolation, creating a further hyper-anxious and a hyper-aware mode of existence.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, PTSD symptoms include:

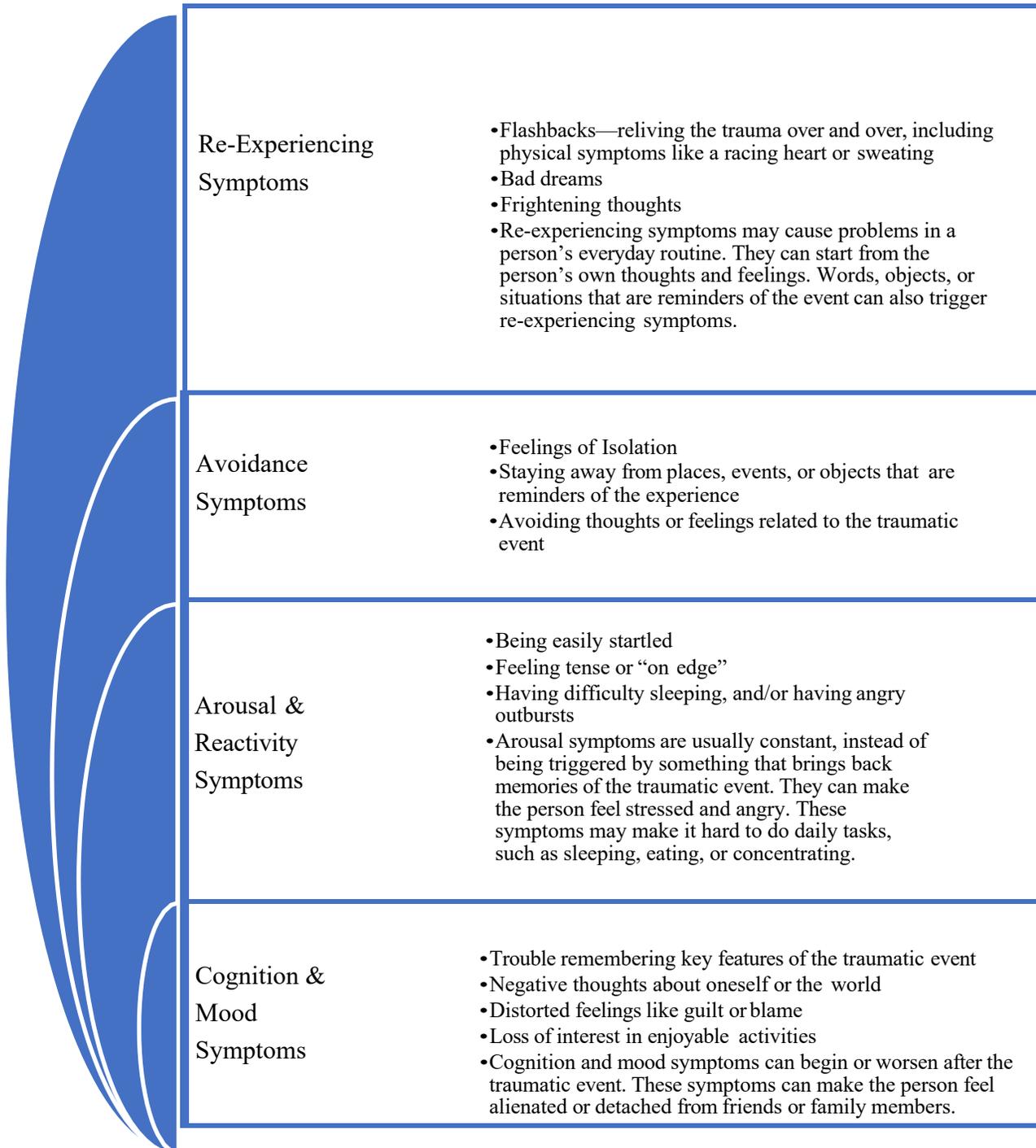


Fig. 9: National Institute of Mental Health, PTSD symptoms. 2019.

A study, titled “The use of alcohol and drugs to self-medicate symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder” conducted by J.M. Bolton, M. Leeies, J. Pagura, and J. Sareen, found that “20%

of individuals with PTSD used substances in an attempt to relieve their symptoms.” Another study, titled “The Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders in a Community Sample of Female Victims of Intimate Partner Violence,” which was conducted in 2012, sampled a group of women exposed to psychological abuse, a group of women exposed to physical abuse, and a control group of women exposed to neither. Researchers found that “the majority of women met diagnostic criteria for a mental health disorder, with PTSD being the most common mental health disorder. Furthermore, psychological abuse was a significant predictor of both PTSD and depression, whereas physical aggression did not predict these outcomes” (Nathanson, Rhatigan, Shorey, & Tirone, 2012, p. 1).

Co-occurrence of Mental Health Disorders among IPV Victims.

	<i>n</i>	% within disorder	
PTSD & Depression	43	PTSD	79.6
		Depression	81.1
PTSD & Alcohol Dep	11	PTSD	20.4
		Alcohol Dep	64.7
PTSD & Substance Dep	4	PTSD	7.4
		Substance Dep	6.7
PTSD & Alcohol Abuse	3	PTSD	5.6
		Alcohol Abuse	100
PTSD & Drug Abuse	5	PTSD	9.3
		Drug Abuse	83.3
		Depression	Alcohol Dep

Fig. 10: Nathanson, Rhatigan, Shorey, & Tirone, 2012

In 2019, Mindwise.org published an online article noting that survivors of sexual abuse are “three times more likely than the average person to suffer from depression, and six times more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.” (Mindwise.org, 2019) They found that

regarding sexual abuse survivors, “some studies report that sexual abuse victims are 13 times more likely to abuse alcohol and 26 times more likely to abuse drugs than those who have not been sexually abused” (Mindwise.org, 2019). The reasons noted were “coping mechanisms, feelings of isolation/ loneliness, low self-esteem, and that the substance abuse was a manifestation of self-destructive behavior” (Mindwise.org, 2019). In order to effectively address trauma and PTSD, this reality needs to be taken into account as well. If not confronted head on, it can gradually sabotage all attempts at catharsis and release.

Mindfulness and Meditation

Engaging the physical body remains a principal vehicle for learning, and this can be achieved through many forms of meditation (Beilock, 2015). While addressing PTSD, we might choose to involve meditative practices which access the more unconscious aspects of our physical and emotional being, utilizing meditative practices such as Kundalini Yoga, Tai Chi, Transcendental Meditation, or Vipassana Meditation for example.

When practicing meditative movement within a group, whether maintaining stillness or incorporating physical movements we are learning new forms of dialogue within our physical self—reaching a higher cognitive space, and sharing that journey with a peer on physical and empathetic levels. Group gatherings, which, as noted earlier, feed directly into our body’s reward system, can really magnify the impact of each of the practices I’ve discussed thus far.

Mindfulness meditation can create a calm quiet space in the brain’s default operating system (Beilock, 2015). When the mind is not engaged in a task, it is best not to be preoccupied with hyperactively scanning for danger highlighting commonalities in visual stimuli; it is best not to obsess over constant reminders of the original trauma, effectively re-experiencing

traumatic event after traumatic event in the mind's eye. Mindfulness meditation helps to block out such triggers and fears.



Fig. 11: The Glass Onion, Michael Divine, ND

Meditation can further assist survivors in giving them more control over their present focus and the moment they are currently in (Beilock, 2015). This is important because non-regulation of mindspace when the mind is not directly engaged in an occupying activity leaves the mind subject to wandering and rumination over past or potential future events (Beilock, 2015). Self-actualization via non-responsive observation can be built upon with regular practice,

when developing a habit. As noted earlier, action patterns are determined based upon those decisions that were made most frequently in the past, and this process strengthens the neural pathways which feed into our explicit and implicit memory. Creating new neural pathways which observe yet hold back a response, cutting off the oxygen supply, so to speak, to previously accessed pathways.

Now, when these practices are applied to a mind ripe with visual trauma-based triggers, flashbacks and hyperarousal, we can assume the mind can habitualize this new set of action patterns, in search of safety. If, through mindfulness meditation, we can teach the mind to step back and observe without response, we can then create a more coherent actionable existence and allow the inflammatory memory to simmer down some, while reaching out to other parts of our body and psyche for reconciliation.

According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally...And then I sometimes add, in the service of self-understanding and wisdom” (Kabat-Zinn, 2017, p. 1). Jon Kabat-Zinn created the research-backed stress-reduction program Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

Mindfulness meditation teaches us to focus our attention and draw in observations of our succinct realities. Mindfulness meditation does not draw upon the experiences and feedback of others, but rather teaches the acts of direct observation as a skillset able to be possessed by all who desire it. Mindful-based meditation clear-cuttingly opens the doors monitored by the brain’s Default Mode Network, our autopilot, and allows us to monitor our stimuli and control our response more efficiently (Beilock, 2015; Garrison, K., Zeffiro, T. A., Scheinost, D., Constable, R. T., & Brewer, J. A., 2016).

Mindfulness meditation teaches observation without judgment, response, or assigning that observation any value. Through and through, with all that is sensed, the goal is to observe without reaction. When I sat for my first Vipassana course, a silent meditation course, we sat for many hours a day. We were given audio/video instruction at the end of each day and the ability to ask questions to the teachers leading the course throughout the day. While sitting, I would experience sleeping feet and muscle cramps in my back. My mind wandered over and over again. I surely thought I was doing all of this wrong, and that because of my physical pains, maybe I wasn't cut out for it. Even after they gave me an elevated cushion to sit on, my feet still tingled and this completely dominated my attention.

This was until one teacher advised me that I was to observe this sensation without allowing it to dominate my attention. I hadn't even considered that. I learned to subtly shift my weight in ways allowing me to sit longer with less pushback from my body. I learned that my straying autopilot was being reigned in, managed—by me. The lesson here was that we all experience sensations, sensations are neither good nor bad—they just are. Observe them without judgement, move on to the next observation. They are all valid and real. No matter how demanding a sensation can seem, it is merely a physical sensation just as the air moving along the hairs on my skin is. Equal in value for their presence in my reality.

The more we allow the gross sensations to dominate our attendings, the more we miss. If we allow ourselves to be caught up in the insistence of gross sensations, we are controlled by them. Our action patterns set out to find those relations and build regular, habitual actionary responses to stimuli. As the phrase is often said, we are creatures of habit. But, if we learn to stop and look and refrain from mindlessly responding, we can learn so much more. We can see so much more. We will never see new possibilities if we are caught up in responding to the

dominant stimuli, and we cannot learn to control the action patterns our Default Mode Network manages for us.

Mindfulness practices and mindfulness meditation has the ability to intervene in this cycle by allowing the survivor to put space in between their triggers and their flashbacks within their current day-to-day experiences. Mindfulness meditation practices create new pathways within the brain and has been shown to create more calm and less perseverating within moments not currently assigned to a task. The brain, instead, is allowed to simply perceive the moment of the present reality the survivor is currently experiencing. This allows room for hyperactive danger-scanning to be put to rest, and for a survivor to witness the current actual reality the they are currently in. These moments might happen while driving in a car, at work or school, while passing some form of visual stimuli relative to the traumatic event *previously* experienced; these moments might contain sounds or scents relative to the moment of the original trauma inflicted. When living within chronic trauma, the eyes can sometimes see all of reality as a danger zone. Safety cannot be found anywhere, but it's what the survivor really needs more than anything. Mindfulness meditation can help the survivor recognize the lack of threat in their *current* and future environments.

Exposure to Nature and its Impact on Resiliency

When immersed in natural surroundings, the brain can experience greater resiliency. Scientists have recently found that nature itself has a significant impact upon working memory, and working memory allows for greater cognitive resilience within moments of stress (Beilock, 2015). As noted previously, the working memory is managed within the explicit memory system. Just looking at a photograph or painting of a nature scene can pose significant benefit.

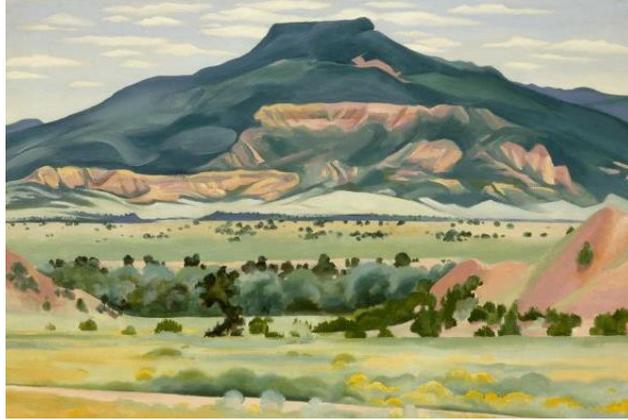


Fig. 12: "My Front Yard," Georgia O'Keefe, 1941

In studies among college students living in dorms and impoverished communities living in high-rise public housing projects, those with some regular view of nature, even just a small patch of grass with a tree, were found to have scored higher on tests and experience less violence in the home (Beilock, 2015).

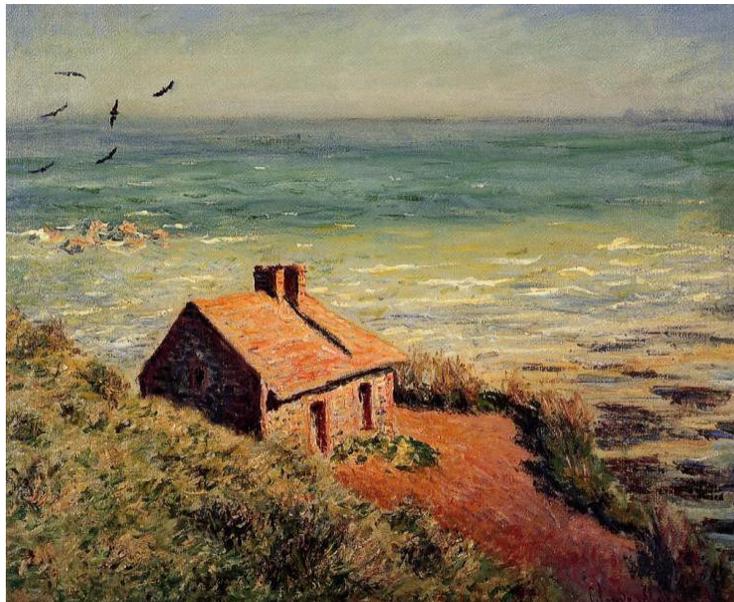


Fig. 13: "The Customs House, Morning Effect" Claude Monet, 1882

Amber Pearson, a health geographer at Michigan State University, worked on a study which researched links between mental health and living near the ocean. The study found that

“Increased views of blue space is significantly associated with lower levels of psychological distress” (Pearson, 2016).



Fig. 14: Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Viaduct of the Arc River Valley, Paul Cézanne, 1882-85

For a person living under the veil of trauma, in darkness which often clouds the eyes with a constant brutal pain on the platform of violence and suffering, differing forms of nature can aid the resiliency levels by increasing the capacity and functionality of working memory. Getting outside for a walk by the lake or a hike through the woods can help flush out negative energy, reenergize working memory, and get endorphins pumping through the blood stream. Hanging nature-based art in the living space can pull some of these sensations into the home. Creating one’s own landscape paintings can further aid this mission.

Art Practice & Art Therapy

Art therapy has proven beneficial in many ways for survivors with PTSD as it allows the mind to process intolerable experience(s). When the explicit and implicit memory cannot tolerate

an experience, the experience cannot be processed or laid to rest in the past. If the implicit memory cannot understand the threat as being something of the past, it will remain vigilant.

Intrusive memories will interrupt days and nights through immersion in survival mode. PTSD is a result of a gap in communication between the explicit and implicit mind. Vague reminders will trigger intolerable memories and emotions related to the original traumatic incident. The default mode network will glide in to manage basic activities such as walking, even while the mind is swimming in flashbacks.

An art practice allows for these intrusions to be processed and dealt with. Art allows for these feelings to be faced and analyzed. Art allows for learning to happen, sourcing out one's feelings, relating to the subject, and reconstituting identity. When we create, we are accessing the nonverbal part of our minds in order to translate our feelings and aesthetic explorations. We are meditating on thoughts and ideas, bringing them out of the intangible space of thought processes into a concrete and tangible existence.

When exploring an art practice, the processes of creation, we are engaged in a mindful process. Creativity is a very meditative process which immerses the partaker into more and more refined levels of thought, perceptions of the world surrounding their person, interrogating their own thought processes. Because creation is the process of bringing something into existence which previously did not exist, we are bearing conscious witness to the reaching into our own unconscious mind, where thoughts and feelings develop, and also to the developmental process of pulling of those notions and emotions into intangible, conscious existence. Our conscious mind then studies and proliferates this content as we bring works of art into tangible existence.

Via acts of creation, the creator is in full control of the decisions and actions made during the process of creating. After pulling what has been envisioned out into reality, the work can be

further contemplated and synthesized, eliciting the voice of the artist. Creation after creation, time and time again. The sights and voice are refined further with each creation.



Fig. 15: Hand Stencils, Cave of Fingers, Justin Mott, ND

Art was one of the very first forms of communication among the human species, with works dating back to the ages of cavemen. The Smithsonian Magazine’s Jo Marchant wrote an article titled “A Journey to the Oldest Cave Paintings in the World” in January of 2016; geochemist Maxime Aubert and archeologist Adam Brumm calculated the hand stencils painted in a particular cave in Sulawesi, Indonesia to be 35,400 years old. The article also noted Benjamin Smith, a rock art scholar at the University of Western Australia, as saying that “we couldn’t conceive of art, or conceive of the value of art, until we had higher order consciousness” (Marchant, 2016, p. 1) We have been creating, as a species, for at least 35,400 years—instinctually we create from something within us we cannot communicate otherwise.

Within the world of art and creation, people can build upon their levels of self-perception and self-expression through the nonverbal foundations of art. Studies have found that creating comes from within and accesses both sides of the brain in the creative process (King, 2016, p. 43). This information is key to be aware of when working with trauma survivors and for the survivor to be explicitly aware of. This creation component is key because of the undealt with, overwhelming, and intolerable notions backdating to the moment(s) of trauma(s).

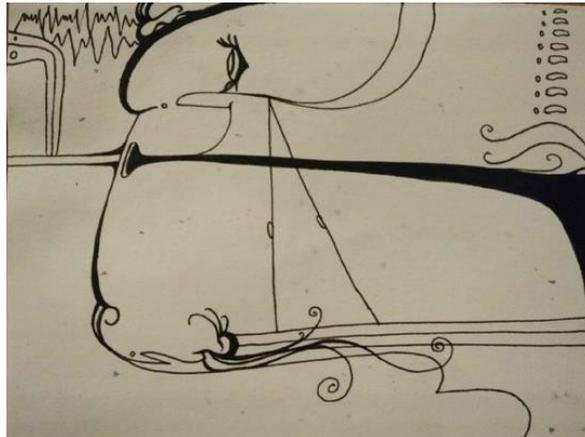


Fig. 16: Sight Series I, J. McGhee, 2016

As previously addressed, when the implicit memory cannot deal with a memory, the memory festers and cannot be processed into its proper linear placement in the survivor's history. Hypervigilance cannot determine that the incident is in fact a part of the past.

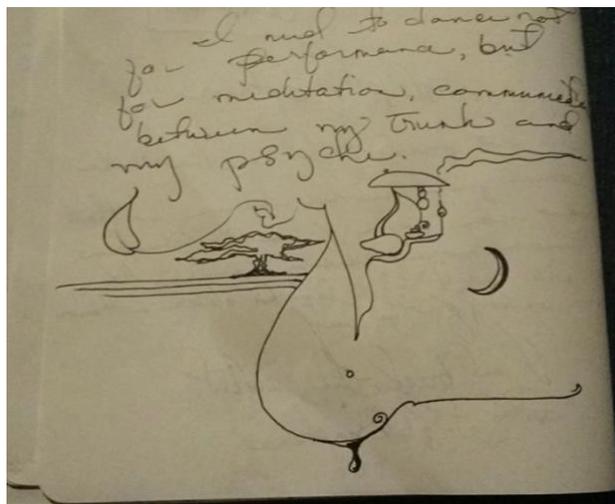


Fig. 17: Sight Series II, J. McGhee, 2016

Bridging needs to happen—communication between implicit and working (explicit) memory needs to happen. Hand the survivor the keys to both worlds, so some sense can be made of what the eyes, mind and body are experiencing together. Art builds upon this bridge.

“Repetition causes neural evolution throughout the brain” (King, 2016, p. 13); each time we

practice art, and are refining our voice, we are actually building stronger neural pathways which further allow us to examine our implicit thought processes, emotional foundations, and nonverbal trauma symptoms. A regular art practice can help the survivor deal with the sensory-motor and nonverbal foundations of trauma by exposing moments which difficult to perceive and easy to overlook. There is a large difference between telling oneself the trauma is over and actually sensing it has passed and is no longer near. When struggling with nonverbal trauma—experiences which lay claim to areas deeper than the conscious mind—art can be that bridge of catharsis, helping the creator to express what’s going on inside them.

Art is created in safe space, separate from the trauma; even for the abused partner still existing in a toxic setting, art can become a consistently safe space of retreat. Each person’s artwork is created using that person’s own explicit and implicit languages, and can be as overt or coded as preferred via the determination of the creator, while also functioning as the witness to the creator’s process. The art of survivors is a complex sensory-motor tunnel toward freedom from harm, a synthesis of the reality one is presently living, and the reality one has survived through. Art lends a critical eye to experience and mediates both just and unjust existences. Art is the siren on the front step gazing at the sunrise.

During creative practices, resilience is strengthened through learning. Open and honest self-expression is drawn out through the nonverbal sensory-motor processing of implicit emotion; this process draws out a tangible product which has roots in verbal expression. Even if the explicitly ideated creation produces limited verbal analysis, it is still a step closer to heightened momentary awareness and grows stronger with repeated practice. Objective thoughts can be synthesized through this meditative creative process. Immediate gratification cannot be had here. The work reveals the mindsight. This processing actualizes one’s resilience and places

the past reality in the distance. Heightened notions of self-worth emerge as the creative process resets the belief system, passions, and personal values of the creator.

When working with a survivor of chronic or complex traumas, Art-Therapy Relational Neuroscience (ATR-N) utilizes an “understanding of trauma-conditioned and altered neurobiological systems [which] also suggests that until change can happen therapeutic conditions must also include a focus on softening the impact of complex trauma symptoms” (King, 2016, p. 100). In this process, mindfulness practices and encouragement of self-compassion is combined with the art therapy. “Art therapists should have a working knowledge of applied neurobiology of chronic trauma, autobiographical memory, creativity and resiliency” (King, 2016, p. 101). When working with survivors, it is so important to understand how the brain functions—in and out of and even beyond the original trauma—and to communicate how simple actions can create a tidal wave of self-confidence enabling the management of the intolerable memories of one’s past. Most important is the recognition that just as the trauma originates in the past, in most cases the threat has also past as well. To witness and bask in the current moment is to experience one’s reclaimed beauty to the fullest.

Chapter 3: Conclusions and Recommendations On Getting Unstuck

Methods for intervention on behalf of those who are “stuck” typically include talk therapy, but nonverbal therapies appear to be attracting more people within society in the more recent years. Many veteran’s programs include PTSD interventions with tactile attributes such as Expressive Arts Therapies, Equine Therapy, Wilderness Therapy, and Agriculture Therapy. Talk therapy alone is, oftentimes, not strong enough to penetrate the nonverbal trauma barriers barring survivors from peace, and also often re-triggers the trauma.

Tracing the different functions of memory is important as a cartesian grid upon which to objectively lay new thought patterns down upon. The implicit memory manages emotional response and behavior. The more we see a need for a certain behavioral response, the more it is built into our action patterns, and the stronger those neural pathways become. In treating trauma, we need to focus on making space for post-traumatic *growth*.

We can utilize mindfulness to restructure and strengthen healthier action patterns, our default mode network and our reality, to refine our sights, to redefine what our eyes have become trapped within. If we are more in control of our reality, if we can witness more than our fears and triggers, we are then able to witness more of our own beauty and strength. We can more easily define toxic situations by their overstimulating elements. If we can define ourselves as logical witnesses, we are less subject to emotionally consuming behaviors. If we as survivors can define our voices as coherent and calculating, exploratory and creative, we can forge new paths and new modes of operations.

The notion I have been trying to flush out with regard to trauma and procedural memory is that we need to make significant explicit adaptations within our behavioral patterns to influence our implicit memory’s handlings of its content and surroundings. The internal

understanding of that which is safe and that which is unsafe, and, additionally, that which must be avoided needs to be recoded in a healthy way which solidifies the traumatic memory as no longer a part of the present reality, but rather part of the past. This doesn't mean to recode the past, but rather that the more we dwell on a new topic the more dominant those neural pathways become. Allowing for more resilience-building pathways to flourish and strengthen allows space for post-traumatic growth and the ability to move throughout life more easily, and away from the symptoms of the post-traumatic stress disorders.

Explicit behavioral changes can change the way our neurobiological explicit and implicit minds function as a matter of routine. Interaction with other people can help balance our hormonal response, because we actually need to belong to one another, or, as previously noted, we will suffer physiologically and emotionally. A steady meditation practice enhances gray matter growth within the brain, which aids in managing stress and processing information, and allows the default mode network to rest in standby mode while the meditative practitioner becomes more aware in their present moments. Mindfulness-based art therapy utilizes sensory-motor nonverbal expression to bridge the gap between the explicit and implicit memory, which has been preventing the survivor from living a healthy and clear-minded life via nightmares, flashbacks, triggers and ruminations. The tools provided by mindfulness can provide, paired with the positive cognitive impact of natural spaces, such as wooded settings or the beach, allows the survivor to begin to acquire control over the wandering of their mind's eye.

In this safe space created by meditation, mindfulness and artmaking, we can detach the value assigned to prior events deemed too massively detrimental for our psyche to comprehend. We can observe and acknowledge, without denial, that what happened was in fact some awful thing experienced. However, it does not need to reverberate endlessly through our bodies and

minds, determining our lives for us. And when I say we, I mean *we* as a part of a community of survivors—*we* as in you and me. We need one another. This remains even more true for survivors of trauma.

As an artist and survivor of sexual and domestic violence myself, I feel we can use art along with the study of the brain to help usher others out of the dark abyss trauma can blanket its survivors with. There is a chemical process we live our days through naturally; when intentionally combined with the wellness activities and processes noted above noted, we can make it out of the mud of PTSD as a collaborative team. Simple understandings of how the brain actually functions and manages the self, can be immensely beneficial on the path of becoming unstuck. The path of healing and nourishing the self, of self-compassion and loving kindness, alongside creative exploration, attentive catharsis, and knowledge of the self-mind, all provide the keys to peace from past breaches of the sacred self.

Break the Chain

Performed by Oh Land

Cold hand surrounds me

I feel the walls around me closing in

And my chest is getting tighter

Cold winds are blowing on

What you left hanging in the air

And your words are getting louder

She said

Sorry but you're never gonna dance again

But my feet just keeps me moving

Trying to break the chain

And I feel like running, and I feel no pain

I feel like running

When I'm lost within my frame

Sharp tongues cut the air

And melt into rain

When it falls on my hand

Is it 'cause I'm gettin' wiser

Far from the ski slope

I feel the earth come running over me

And I feel a little lighter

She said

Sorry but you're never gonna dance again

But my feet just keeps me moving

Trying to break the chain

And I feel like running, and I feel no pain

I feel like running

When I'm lost within my frame

She said

Sorry but you're never gonna dance again

But my feet just keeps me moving

Trying to break the chain

And I feel like running, and I feel no pain

I feel like running

When I'm lost within my frame

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Unconventional Apology Project Interviews:



Isabel Flores

Why are you participating in Unconventional Apology Project?

I want to be an advocate for women who are going through domestic violence and to help the community. Also for other people that are not experiencing, to be aware of it. We're normal people. We look just like everyone else. And the people that are not experiencing to be an inspiration for them as well so they can also participate in making this a better world and helping the people that are struggling with domestic violence. Some of the people that they may know that are hiding behind closed doors and are not able to come out and seek help.

Have you ever had the opportunity to discuss the story you are sharing with us today? What impact did it have on you?

As I was talking about my experience, I felt I was receiving healing from it. Some of the areas that were harder for me to speak on at that moment in time, I realized that area still needs help because it was still painful to speak about. And to know that there's still pain underneath it. Knowing that time has passed by, it still is affecting my life today.

What domestic abuse experience do you want to share?

I'd like to share my last experience, which is the one they always talk about. I feel that there's not very many survivors to give their side of the story. As far as statistics, if you don't come out of the domestic violence, you come out dead. You won't survive. I lived that experience. My husband tried to kill me. I was back in the relationship.

I was renewing my real estate license and I went back to where I was living. When he picked me up from the airport, he didn't bring the children. I asked him why the kids weren't with us. He said it's because he needed to talk to me. At that point, he wanted a divorce. Instead of me behaving like a normal wife would...my own self, I was already planning on my next escape. So, at that point, I felt my mistake was not reacting like a normal wife and sitting down and saying, "Oh, well we're gonna talk." Because I was thinking that we're gonna talk about the divorce. In the midst of it, it turned to where he thought that I was the one wanting the divorce, so it turned into anger from him because I didn't react according to his expectations. So from that point on, he made a point to keep me at different hotels for four days and had already advised the family that I was lost.

After four days of everybody wondering what had happened to me, he didn't wanna have the phone on. So he took me into the mountains. The only one that was with me was my 1-year-old baby because I took him to go renew my real estate license. I had luggage in the back of the car and he told me that he was gonna kill me. So he got out of the car and started throwing the luggage out into the hills. I for some reason got my shoes and I threw them out as far as I could.

And before you know it, he came to my passenger side...I was sitting down, and he grabbed me and threw me out and started kicking me and punching me. I started...because he had told me he was gonna kill me, my body feared. And when I saw the way he was doing that...kicking me and punching me like if he was fighting with a man, I realized that he was after killing me. So I was able to crawl in between the kicks to take my baby out of the backseat. I held my baby in my arms thinking he was gonna stop what he was doing. He never stopped the beating.

In the area where he had parked the car, there was a sugar cane field. There were sugar canes planted all over, but that certain area was in was sand. So because he told me he was gonna kill me, I was thinking that, that's the area where he's gonna bury me because sand was only in that area. So my struggle was always trying to get away from that sand area. To flee from where I'm thinking I'm gonna be buried. So, throughout the fight, I'm trying to walk away from that area. He seems to be adamant about taking me back to that area the whole time. The beating itself was about 5 hours long, with my baby. His motive was to choke me. He was punching me, but at given times, he would throw me down on the floor, and my baby would fly out of my arms and I would land on top of my baby, then him on top of me, choking me. There was three incidents where I was able to pull him off. My last incident, I lost consciousness.

He took off my clothes. I was left with no pants on. When I came back to, he was already walking away with the baby. He was quite a distance away when I got back up. And when he turned to see me that I was actually conscious, he dropped the baby and just threw him down and started running after me. I was able to go into the sugar canes. And as I looked up, I saw the sugar canes moving and I'm thinking, "He's gonna find me." Because he can see on top. So, I thought of throwing myself down...like play dead, so he couldn't find me. But in reality, I was unconscious because I lost track of time. When I came out of the fields, he was already gone. So I went back to look for my pants, I couldn't find them. I went back to look for my luggage, it wasn't there. But the shoes that I had...for some reason I hadn't known why I threw them out, they were still there. Because I threw 'em far. I was asleep when we went into the hills, so I didn't know how far deep into the mountains I was. I had to run. I started running at 7 at night. I was able to grab like a...where you feed animals out of and they're paper bags. I grabbed the paper bag, covering myself, thinking that there were people close by. As I started to run, I didn't see no houses. I can whistle really loud, so I take my two fingers and whistle really loud, to see if I get any response back, but there was no response. And it was 12:45, when I decided, if he comes back, he's not gonna find me. And I was just desperate thinking that there's no way somebody can beat you and leave you be there. He has to come back and find me. So I was trying to run back to the destination where he had left me. But he had went and told the police that his wife ran out of the car and had a nervous breakdown. And that she ran out of the car on a particular street. And the cops were on that street. So when I seen lights, I started putting my hands over my [cups hands around mouth] to scream to call his name. It was quite a distance before they found me because I was already walking back. And when the police approached me, I was scared. I had forgotten that they were looking for me, so I don't know how much time it was for them to travel to try to find me. But after they found me, they told me for me to get out of the area that I was in, I still had 2 more hours to run to be able to get out.

I ended up with 25 hematomas on my head. I had contusions in my liver, it was sliced in 2 different areas. I had bruises all over my body. Scratches from the field because he would

drag me into that field area because I was already advancing. Cuts all over. My baby was bruised. They did measurements of all his bruises and injuries. He was also affected because he was in my arms the whole time.

Still, to this day, he's free.

What no longer lingers in your heart and mind about your experience? What has opened up for you as a result?

My low self-esteem. My low self-esteem of having someone telling me the contrary of my beliefs. The contrary of how things should be done. The specifics of how he wanted things done...that doesn't linger no more. My self-esteem is best now to where I know that, I can do it [smiles]. When before, I was like, I can't do it and I'm not good at doing it. So that no longer lingers now. I'm positive of what I'm doing. I feel secure of where I am and who I am. I know who I am now and I know not to be treated like that.

What is your definition of love and how does that love feel?

[Big smile] My definition of love is very simple. Consideration. Consideration. Because of the person loves you, that person has consideration in your aspects. Consideration of how you feel. Everything falls under that. They have consideration, therefore they're gonna be compassionate towards you. Because they have consideration of what you came from, whatever the case may be. They have consideration for you as a woman, the multitasks that you're doing. Along with that, they'll be compassionate to take care of those areas where you need help. So the best way and simple, easy vocabulary...consideration [laughs].

It gives me comfort. It gives me motivation to move forward. Because that person is giving me that consideration of who you are and look what you're doing with the person that you've become. So it expands me to where it gives me that extra inspiration to move on and move forward and be able to develop my daily tasks, if it's just that.

What does leaving a Trail of Existence mean to you?

First of all, to show that I'm a strong individual. My belief in God. To be able to have that second chance. To be able to tell my story without feeling that they're accusing me of being a liar for protecting the other individual. That's important to me.

Do you have any parting thoughts?

I would just like to say, for all women and young ladies, that we can all be the target. For everyone to know that this can happen to you. I don't want any of us to think that, "Oh, this will NEVER happen to me." Or, "I'm too good for this to happen to me." I just want everyone to know out there that there is no discrimination. You can be a lawyer, you can be a police officer, you can have the most money in the world, you can be broke. It's multiple situations that have happened to different people. There's no telling who it's gonna be. The only thing that I can advise in all ages is always have your eyes open. Because the red flags are ALWAYS there. If it doesn't seem normal to you, if you kinda don't like it, even if it's the smallest thing like, "Hmm...I don't like the way he's eating." You don't like it, you don't like it. You're not gonna like it! [Laughs] So the best thing is, if you see those flags already arising, don't wait til the third flag comes on, because by that time, you're gonna be used to it and

you're gonna say, "It's ok, I can accept this. I can change this." I do believe that us women are thinking that we meet someone and we're gonna change them. Women meet men and they say, "Ok, well when we get married or when we get together, this is gonna change." It never changes. My advice is...I want this to be out...don't stay. As soon as you get the first sign, that's the warning sign. Take the flag and run.

My project to give back to my higher power for allowing me to survive this incident, where even in the hospitals, they don't know how I survived, even in therapy, they don't know how I haven't lost my mind. I just want to give back and help as much as I can in the community. Whether it's young people that are out there single, whether it's middle aged people that are out there single, whether it's elderly people that are out there single, because we're all gonna fall under the same plate. It's all still being single. Important to me is having self-respect, respecting our body and not going with the flow. If our partner wants to go further into having a relationship or getting intimate with each, I feel that, that's our protection. Get to know the person first, before you get your feelings involved. Because once you get your feelings involved, then there's ties already. So my project and, again, I want to be an advocate as much as I can for domestic violence, and also Chastity's Pride. Go back to Chastity's Pride, go back to the courting. They like that even though they want to get intimate and have a sexual relationship with you because that's what our generation is about right now. Be unique. Go back to how it used to be before. Chastity's Pride is gonna give you the opportunity to get to know that individual that you want to get emotionally attached to. After you get emotionally attached, that's bondage. Beautiful if you have a perfect partner, beautiful to have that bondage. But not before until you get to know him. So that's what I'm working on to be able to go speak to people so that they have a better chance of, when those red flags come, they're more knowledgeable. Their feelings are not involved. Because we women are nurturing since we have children. We reproduce, we give life. We have the opportunity to give life, so with us being able to do that, there's an automatic button in here [points to heart] to love. And it's for our partners. It's for everybody, so once we give that heart, because we got these beautiful, wonderful feelings and emotions. Then we just wanna keep finding that love...unconditional. Regardless of what that person has done to us. So that's what my goal is. To be able to have a little bit self-respect for ourselves so we can get to know ourselves as well, as we're learning about the individual.

Also, my next project is a book called "I'm a Living Miracle" that also has a DVD inside of it so that they can share with someone else. That book is touching the points of from the early relationship and how it started, where I've seen all these red flags and how it ended up from a small acquaintance to a husband to where my husband became my attacker. My killer. After that incident, for the people that have gone through domestic violence, so that they can know that there's still life after that. We can survive and we can still come out and sometimes we can come out even stronger.



Peggie Reyna

Why are you participating in the Unconventional Apology Project?

Because when I saw it on the Internet and I read your story, I said I like this program and I would love to be part of it and to be able to share a little bit of my story and the history of intergenerational violence and intergenerational healing.

Had you ever had the opportunity to discuss the story you are sharing with us today?

Yes, many times in many different ways. The very first time, it was extremely difficult. It was really hard. It made me nauseated and I had like tension up my neck—just horrible feelings. But, after that, it became easier. It's about sharing and educating and helping create change. And so, truthfully, it's a joy for me to share it now.

What domestic abuse experience do you want to share?

So I'd like to start with saying that I'm a survivor of domestic violence. I became profoundly deaf from that event. It was many years ago and of course it was the ending to many years of abuse. I married at the age of 16 and the person that I married was an abuser. We lived together for twelve and a half years. Finally, I divorced him. Later, I married a second person and that person was [leans back and shakes head in disgust] a terrible, much worse abuser. On the final day of violence, he threw me against the wall...he jumped on my head and snapped my neck sideways. Left me with a broken jaw...jaw broken in two places, my nose broken, all my teeth kicked out, blood running out of my ears and profoundly deaf. Through the next few years, I had several surgeries that repaired most of that.

I went to and got a degree in special education with a focus on deafness. Eventually, I moved to Los Angeles and also eventually, I went to a luncheon actually where a person was talking about domestic violence. It was the first time that I ever heard about that term "domestic violence" and "abuse" and what happens. I cried through the whole presentation and very soon after that, I left my job at the Long Beach Police Department and I joined the staff at a battered women's shelter. It's been a journey from there to here [Peggie is the Project Director of the Deaf, Disabled and Elder Services Program at Peace Over Violence, a domestic violence prevention and intervention agency in Los Angeles]. I've been here 25 years.

The important thing for me to talk about today is not that. But about the intergenerational cycle of violence and what happened to my family. In particular, my daughter Dream. And I really wanted to focus on that because when I saw your story, it made me think about that...about giving image to her life...to what was lost. Dream was already into teen age when I got free from domestic violence. She was already dating the person that she would eventually marry that was her abuser. Through the years, I talked to her a lot about domestic violence, about leaving him,

about getting restraining orders. She always, always went back, same as her momma always went back for so many times. And in 1995, he put a gun to her head and he killed her. I think it's so important to know that domestic violence is intergenerational. That it comes not only from learned behavior, but from learned acceptance to how other people treat you. That if you grow up in a home where you see your mother accept that someone beats her up, punches her in the face, kicks her in the stomach, throws her across the room... she gets up and cleans up the blood and cooks dinner and makes love to him. That what you learn is that that's an acceptable way to do relationships...but it's not.

After I came to Los Angeles and I went to work at the shelter, eventually I came to work at this agency; it was then called Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women. And I worked very hard to get employed here, so I've been here 25 years. And I often say that I learned from LACAAW, everything that I ever needed to know. But as I worked here, and as I grew more and more emotionally free, I began to feel physically more well as well as emotionally more well. And I began to see my life change and then slowly and unbelievably, I saw my children and my grandchildren's lives begin to change. It was too late for my daughter, Dream. But I know that she would be so thrilled to look down and see my grandson and his wife and his two children live in a home absolutely free from violence, or threat of violence or even knowledge of violence for it's not something they have any idea about. No one ever hits them, no one screams at them, no one does that and they get to see it; they live in a different kind of life. And through that, I learned that healing from domestic violence is also intergenerational. That's really the message that I want to give to the world. That you can change and when you change, those that you love can change because you become the role model.

What no longer lingers in your heart and mind about your experience? What has opened up for you as a result?

I no longer feel guilty or responsible either for the violence that happened in my life or for the violence that happened in my children's life. But I feel free to be able to say that what happened wasn't my fault. I didn't know how to change it. And when I did, that's what I did. And the same thing happened for my children. So what it really opened up for me was freedom of guilt, or the "oh poor me" syndrome. Either one of those things went away.

What is the definition of love and how does that love feel?

You know, I don't know that there's a true definition of love, but I think that love is an emotion that fills you from the top to the bottom...just fills you up inside. That it feels like joy. And it feels like happiness. It feels like the ability to deal with any kind of crisis or any kind of problem without that destroying your life because you're so full of love. I really think that love comes in many ways. I have coworkers that I love dearly and I have friends that I love dearly and I have my grandson and my grandchildren and great grandchildren...I love them all differently and yet I love them all so deeply and so very much. So, that brings joy. That's what...love is about feeling joy, even when you feel sad [big smile].

What does leaving a Trail of Existence mean to you?

It means that she didn't die in vain. It means that death by domestic violence can be used as a tool to help those that come later on in life, that come behind her...not to have to go there. It

means that she's an example to say, "This isn't how it has to be." And that's, that's what; it just means change. It means using the stories of the past to change the future.

Do you have any parting thoughts?

If this is something that has happened to you, go get some counseling. Go get help. If this is something that IS happening to you, please contact a crisis agency, get information, an advocate and end the cycle of violence in your life. And then support those agencies that support those who are being victimized and help them become survivors and thrivers and have a life filled with peace.



Tracy Derraco

Why are you participating in Unconventional Apology Project?

I just feel like it's important to get it out there. I've had a lot of shame and guilt on my shoulders for a long time and I just...it's been like a really dark secret that I haven't ever...there's only a few people that I told. I'm kind of transitioning into a new part of my life, with my boyfriend now and just kind of trying to let go of certain things.

Have you ever had the opportunity to discuss the story you are sharing with us today? What impact did it have on you?

I did and I discussed it with my boyfriend last year. Which was kind of hard, it had been bugging me for a while. We were sitting at his house and he was kind of halfway asleep and I was tossing and turning a lot.

And he's like, "What's going on?" and I'm like, "I don't know, I have something to tell you that I haven't told anyone before." And he was just like, "well, what is it?" And I was like, "I don't know if I'm ready to tell you yet." And he's like, "Ok, well just wake me whenever you're ready." [Laughs]. Literally, it took me a couple of hours and he was like, "Ok, I'm gonna get up. I can't sleep." He fixed me a rum and coke [room laughs]. It was like 2 o'clock in the morning and he's like "Ok, I'm gonna get you a rum and coke and you're gonna tell me what's going on." And I told him.

One other person was one of my best friends. I told her actually when it happened. Or the day after because I had left and I went to my mom's house and I didn't know what to do and I didn't want to tell my parents because I was super ashamed of it and completely humiliated. I called her; she wasn't in town at the time, she was at a wedding. Those were pretty much the only two people that I told.

It felt good...but I still had that shame and still felt really humiliated that it happened. It felt good, but it still felt like I needed to not tell anyone and I was super scared. I didn't know what to think because it's never happened. Nothing that crazy has ever happened to me before, really. You know? I almost felt weak you know? Because amongst my friends and family, I come off as a really strong person and really independent. I took martial arts for half my life, my whole life, so it was kind of like...I already had that heartiness and I felt kind of ashamed that I was going through this you know what I mean? I just didn't want to seem weak I guess...and vulnerable.

What domestic abuse experience do you want to share?

One night after we got married (we were probably 8 or 9 months into our marriage, maybe a year), I had been working a lot and he was drinking quite a bit and very, very heavily. I had started working at a local café as a line cook. I had gotten off super late that night. He had told me he was going to go out with friends and stuff to go drinking. And so I was like, "Ok, there's nothing wrong with that." I was always having to just be...I didn't wanna be the kind of girlfriend that was just trying to keep someone in all the time or trying to control someone. "Don't go out drinking tonight. Don't go out with your boys." That kind of was always over my head for a while. I just didn't wanna seem like I was super controlling. I never thought I was, I think it was just him trying to make me feel like I was controlling him, when in actuality, he had all the freedom that he wanted and I was working all the time and serving him and doing stuff for him all the time.

I went to work and I got home pretty late, like around 1:30 or so. I came home and he was completely passed out. He had left his bicycle at the bottom of our staircase at the apartment complex. His bike was unlocked. I came home and I was just kind of like, "What's going on?" You know? I walked his bike up and I went back up the stairs and he had been passed out in the bed. He had his shoes on and clothes and everything. So he was completely dressed. All the lights were on so that was kind of weird too...he was passed out.

I came home and ended up taking a shower and just kinda let him sleep. I was trying to get into bed and I felt bad, like "Oh, I shouldn't let him sleep with his shoes on." He has all of his clothes on that he'd been in all night and smells like cigarettes, and so I just started to take his shoes off. Trying to take his belt off and everything. I was trying to crawl into bed and he was kind of laid out all over the bed. I was like, "Hey can you move please?" And he was completely passed out. I'm like, "Hey, I need room on the bed" [simulates nudging motion]. He wasn't waking up. He's just kind of shifting around a little bit. So I'm like, [firmer voice] "Hey, can you please move? I'm tryna get into bed babe. I'm tryna get into bed." And he had gotten in my face. It was a really long time ago, but he told me that he was pissed off for me always trying to bother him or keep him from hanging out with his boys, you know what I mean? "You're always bothering me when I'm trying to have fun." You know? "Why don't you just leave me alone, go sleep on the couch." I was like, "No. I took off your shoes, I'm trying to be cool about it." And he tried to sleep on the bed again and wouldn't let me come onto the bed. I kinda just pushed my way into the bed. He got mad and he picked me up and pretty much threw me into a mirror. We had a really small room, and the mirror was kind of by the door and the mirror broke. I had gotten a few cuts on my arms and had gotten some glass in my hand. So after he did that, he went back to bed [sigh in disbelief]. I went into the bathroom and I just started crying [tears] and cleaning up, trying to get the glass out and everything. I had locked the doors...completely freaked out. And I just was

weeping in the bathroom for a good couple of hours. And I wanted to call my cousin to have her pick me up but I was afraid to leave the bathroom. So I stayed in there probably about an hour and a half or so. I heard him shuffling around and I heard him get up. He was trying to get into the bathroom. And he was trying to get in to use the bathroom. I told him to go away. I wanted him to leave the apartment. I said, "Hey, you threw me into a mirror. The mirror's broken." He was screaming at me, "I need to use the bathroom!" And I told him to go away and that I didn't want him in the apartment, and I told him to leave and he just kept on laughing like, "I'm not gonna leave. I'm not leaving. Let me use the bathroom right now." And I told him "No, stay away from me. I'm gonna stay in the bathroom until you leave." And he's like, "well I'm not leaving and I'm not going to the bathroom inside, so come out." I was super freaked out; I didn't know what to do. I told him I'm not coming out of the bathroom. And he's like, "well, if you don't come out of the bathroom, I'm gonna break the door down and use the bathroom." And I said "No! [Shakes head profusely]" And I kept on screaming at him just to leave me alone and he came in. I heard him shove the bathroom door with his shoulder a few times. And then he kicked it open. And I was sitting on the toilet kinda not looking at him...looking down [tilts head town and covers face with hand to shield]. And he was like, "You need to move right now." And I kept on screaming at him to get away from me and just to leave. And he didn't wanna leave. He's like, "I want you to get out of the bathroom. Maybe you should leave. You get out of the apartment." And I told him, "No." I didn't wanna go. And he's like, "If you don't get off the toilet right now, I'm just gonna piss on you." And I told him just to leave and I kept on crying [tears] and I couldn't talk after he told me that. And he was like, "This is the last time I'm gonna tell you. You better get up or I'm gonna fuckin' piss on you." And I just started crying and all of a sudden, he just started urinating all over me [tears] and it was completely humiliating and I don't know why I just sat there. And just let him do it. I was just crying and after he was done, he got up and just went back to bed.

After he passed out again, I ended up getting my things while he was asleep and called my cousin and told her what was going on. I got my dogs, 'cause I have two dogs and I brought them to my mom's house. And my mom was kinda freakin' out, like "Well, did he hit you? Did he hit you?" I didn't tell her because I didn't want anything to happen because I have two older brothers too and if they found out it would have been really terrible and I just didn't want the whole drama thing. So I lied to my mom, but I told my best friend and she was just like, "I don't know what to do. I'm out here in Northern California with everyone. I don't know what to do." She's like, "Can you hold on till I get home?" And I was just like, "Ok." I sought for divorce right after and then I had told him about what happened when I got back from my parents' house and I saw him down the street. I think he went to the liquor store. He went to go get Gatorade or something. I went to ask him about what had happened and he told me he didn't remember what happened. He didn't remember anything. I told him what had happened and he's like, "No. That never happened." And I'm like, "No. That's what happened. You threw me across." And I showed him the cuts and everything and I'm like, "Ok, well I'm done I don't wanna do this anymore. I wanna get a divorce." And he didn't want a divorce. He kind of begged me to stay with him and I told him I didn't want to. I stayed in the same apartment with him for a while and I was still kind of going through the paperwork and everything and then we came to the conclusion that we were going to try to work it out only if we went and got marriage counseling.

We went and got marriage counseling. It helped for a little bit and then he was kind of like, “I don’t want to go and do this anymore. I don’t want to do the marriage counseling. I think it’s fine. I think we’re fine now.” It was ok for a little bit. We hadn’t taken a honeymoon yet. So we went to Thailand. It was kind of a good for a little while and...again, it happened in Thailand too. He was drinking and then we got into a scuffle in the bedroom and he ended up holding me down and screaming in my face. I don’t even remember what we were arguing about. I think most of the times that he did, because it would happen pretty often...I don’t even remember what we were talking about. You know what I mean?

It’s crazy because I never really thought like I was being hurt or anything. I don’t know why, I just felt like it was normal or that I should be ashamed of myself. A lot of the time he would blame me for him...for provoking him to do things you know what I mean? After that incident had happened I had gotten really, really, really depressed about it and I had kinda thought about taking my own life for a while. He held that against me and pretty much told me that I was crazy and stuff. And kind of used that psychologically against me to say that, “You’re crazy. You don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re not really feeling this way.” I was thinking about this last night and I was just like God, all the things he used to say to me to make me feel like I was going crazy you know? I had told him that I had tried to do that and that I was thinking about doing those things to myself just so he would know. That maybe he could help me or something or have some sympathy. Something for me. Not necessarily sympathy but just something. It went on for quite a while after that. We were living in that apartment. I was really, really cool with it because I was around my friends and family. I’m an avid surfer...we were both surfers at the time. I lived like right next to the beach so I’d just walk to the beach. That community was kind of like my safe community. I knew everyone there. They raised the rent of our apartment and I was happy to pay for it because I was with my friends and my second family and the community, had lived there for years, like ten years. And he was just like, “No, let’s move out. Let’s go somewhere cheaper. We can get an apartment about 20-25 minutes away from here for like \$900, \$600.” And I was totally against it. I didn’t wanna do it. And he convinced me to do it and that’s when things got worse. Because I wasn’t around my family. And I wasn’t around my friends anymore. And it was just me and him all the time. It got a lot worse. He was in my face a lot more. Every time we would have an argument, it would definitely escalate to something physical. He would always be in my face [juts head forward]. Or if I was trying to walk away and not like try to provoke him [tucks head down, shrinks shoulders] in any way, he’d try to get in my face anyways. He’d head-butt me a few times and back me into a corner. If I tried to leave, he’d lock the door and threaten, “If you leave, don’t ever come back. I don’t even wanna take you back.” That would freak me out because he was all I had and I was completely in love with him, you know? Completely in love with him. He had gone through some things with his family too and I just felt like I didn’t wanna abandon him you know what I mean? Yeah, it was crazy. The whole entire time we lived in that other house...it was just every time we got into an argument, it just got so much more worse. Just physically, mentally, sexually too.

The sexual abuse that I experienced. I never...I thought it was normal. Until I had spoken to my boyfriend about it and he’s like, “No. He raped you. You need to consent. You need to be able to say...you need to want to have sex with someone to have sex with someone.” And he’s like, “It’s not just because he’s your husband. He doesn’t have you like property. You’re not his property over you.” And I was totally like, “Oh my God! You’re right.” It was definitely like that. There

were times when I'd be asleep or sick [tears] and he would come onto me...I'd be asleep. And I remember I woke up one time and he was having sex with me and I just started crying. My back was turned and I cried the whole entire time. And then he just finished. And I remember thinking the whole time that I was just a body, you know? I was just a body for him. And it felt shitty 'cause I was completely in love with him and I just wanted something different you know? I just wanted to be a good wife too. That was always going through my head: "Just be a good wife. Take care of him. That's what you're supposed to do." You know [tears]? And I was so caught up in trying to be a good wife for him that I definitely ignored myself. It was pretty awful those last 2 years. And then he ended up leaving me and that was when I just started doing things for myself and realizing what was going on. And I started getting kinda sick of it. And I was standing up to him, which I probably shouldn't have done. I didn't know what else to do. I just got completely sick of it. And that's when he started kind of fading away and leaving me alone and stuff like that. He just didn't wanna be around me I guess 'cause I wasn't giving him that satisfaction of trying to control me all the time. He would always bring up the fact that I was doing martial arts. I was doing jujitsu and after that I was doing Kung Fu and I was doing MMA training. And a lot of the times he'd be like, "If you call the cops, they're not gonna believe you anyway. You have all this martial arts training." And yeah...that kind of made me think about it like, "Yo, you're right." Maybe I am being abusive. Maybe I'm the abuser? You know? Screaming at you all the time. For the longest time, I felt like I was provoking him to do it and that I deserved it you know what I mean? I deserved everything. Like my self worth...I didn't have any self worth. I didn't really have the ability to even make decision on what I wanted to do you know what I mean? It was always like, "I gotta take care of him. I gotta get up at 4:30 in the morning to make him breakfast in the morning and coffee and make sure that he has lunch and spend my whole entire day making sure he has dinner for when he gets home. But when I get home...he would take the car to work. When we moved out from the old apartment to this other one, he would take the car to work and I would have to ride my bike and then take the trolley for like a good half hour you know? I would literally just spend my day trying to make sure that he was ok. And I didn't really realize until after he left...I was just racking my brain, trying to figure out how to get him back...how to get him back. Until I started going to see a therapist and they were just like, why would you want this person back? They didn't really tell me "No." You know what I mean? They didn't tell me no. They're like, "Ok, yeah. Tell us about what happened." And then I just had a moment with my therapist like, "Oh my God. Why do I want this person back in my life?" [Laughs].

What no longer lingers in your heart and mind about your experience? What has opened up for you as a result?

What no longer lingers in my mind is anger towards him. Doing this Project is helping me let go of those things and to kind of forgive that and just let me move on. Also, just the humiliation and the shame of just having that happen to me. I don't have to be ashamed of it because, obviously there's a lot of other women and men and children that this happens to every day. So it's kind of like I'm not alone and there's nothing to be ashamed of because it happened.

Things that have opened up are...a lot of things; I'm able to do things now [laughs]. I can go surfing anytime that I want to and I can travel. Before that...a lot of my friends were always abroad and I really admired that about them. I've been able to travel and make plans to go out of

the country a lot and with work too, I'm able to concentrate more at work. It's not like I HAVE to get home and get this done so I can take care of him and have to rush out. I can spend more time thinking of more creative things to do at work. You know? I can study up on different cooking techniques. Just being able to focus more at work has been really awesome. It's been cool to do whatever and not kind of like be stuck in one place...not secluded. I've been able to see my friends and go out, which has been really awesome. It's really cool. For the longest time I hadn't been hanging out with them, but now that I'm closer to them...I'm back in my neighborhood again. I moved back last year [big smile]. So they're just like, "Yay! You're back!" Everyone's like, "I'm so happy that you moved back, you belong here! I don't know why the heck you moved!" It's nice to be around everyone. They haven't seen me in the water for a long time and they're like, "Where have you been?" You know? "Oh, you know, life." I've been able to just pretty much live so it's been awesome [laughs].

What is your definition of love and how does that love feel?

My definition of love is unconditional. I was just thinking about this yesterday. One of my favorite things is laying in bed and just being warm and having a nice blanket. Just feeling very comfortable. Love gives each other space when we need to have space. It's just unconditional. It's not having to hold someone down and trying to control them. It's setting them free so they're able to kind of expand and be more than what they are. To kind of figure out who they are as people and just be supportive of that.

[My new love] feels good! It definitely feels like that! It's crazy how much space he allows me to have. I'm not always checking, like "Is that ok? Is that ok?" It's like, "Yeah, go with your friends, it's fine." And even with my friends we'd go out...if I did go out with my girlfriends, my ex-husband would always have to be there. It's always be like, "Oh no. Let me go. I wanna go with you guys." I went and hung out with my girlfriend recently to have dinner and she was like, "Oh, you didn't bring him?" And I was like, "No, he didn't wanna go and he just wanted to hang out at home." And she's like, "Oh, well that's nice [laughs]. That's really nice! It's nice that he's really respecting your girl time." And I kind of thought of it and I'm like, "Yeah, huh? A lot of the times we're kind of hanging out by ourselves now." So that's been really cool. A lot of the times I haven't had the space I really wanted to be with my friends and do the things I needed to do. So that's been really cool. He's just super supportive. It's not like...Sometimes I wait for it to escalate. Like I feel like it's gonna get escalated into this really, crazy yelling in your face and stuff. It's always like, break...come back and then we'll talk about it. And he's always really calm. And, "I'm not gonna yell at you. I'm angry because of this. Why are you angry?" It's never like, "You did this to me! You did this to me! I don't wanna do this! Blah blah blah!" It's NEVER like that. It's like, "This is where I'm at. And this is where I'm at." "Ok, well, let's talk about it." I'm just sitting there waiting for it to escalate and it never does. It feels good to not have to go there with someone, you know? It's awesome [laughs, big smile]. Where if we have disagreements, we learn from them and we progress from them. It's nice. It's nice to have a real relationship. It's pretty crazy. It's nice. It's really nice.

What does leaving a Trail of Existence mean to you?

It means living and sharing my experience with people so that they could learn from that too. Looking back and letting those things go and acknowledging that those things happened to me. I'm gonna learn from them. It was something that happened, you know? Just constantly

learning about myself and being able to let other people know what had happened so they can relate. Basically, just letting people know what had happened to me 'cause I don't wanna keep it inside anymore.

Do you have any parting thoughts?

If you're reading about all these stories and everything and it really relates to you, try and seek help. Know that you are important. You know what I mean? You are important. Always take care of yourself. Taking care of yourself mentally and being happy. Making yourself happy so you can be healthy and live pretty much. If you're not happy, how are you ever gonna live? How are you ever gonna open other doors and avenues and see the world for what it is?

These and more interviews available at www.unconventionalapologyproject.org

My Story of Survival: Battling PTSD

by P.K. Philips, Anxiety and Depression Association of America

It is a continuous challenge living with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and I've suffered from it for most of my life. I can look back now and gently laugh at all the people who thought I had the perfect life. I was young, beautiful, and talented, but unbeknownst to them, I was terrorized by an undiagnosed debilitating mental illness.

Having been properly diagnosed with PTSD at age 35, I know that there is not one aspect of my life that has gone untouched by this mental illness. My PTSD was triggered by several traumas, including a childhood laced with physical, mental, and sexual abuse, as well as an attack at knifepoint that left me thinking I would die. I would never be the same after that attack. For me there was no safe place in the world, not even my home. I went to the police and filed a report. Rape counselors came to see me while I was in the hospital, but I declined their help, convinced that I didn't need it. This would be the most damaging decision of my life.

For months after the attack, I couldn't close my eyes without envisioning the face of my attacker. I suffered horrific flashbacks and nightmares. For four years after the attack I was unable to sleep alone in my house. I obsessively checked windows, doors, and locks. By age 17, I'd suffered my first panic attack. Soon I became unable to leave my apartment for weeks at a time, ending my modeling career abruptly. This just became a way of life. Years passed when I had few or no symptoms at all, and I led what I thought was a fairly normal life, just thinking I had a "panic problem."

Then another traumatic event re-triggered the PTSD. It was as if the past had evaporated, and I was back in the place of my attack, only now I had uncontrollable thoughts of someone entering my house and harming my daughter. I saw violent images every time I closed my eyes. I lost all ability to concentrate or even complete simple tasks. Normally social, I stopped trying to make friends or get involved in my community. I often felt disoriented, forgetting where, or who, I was. I would panic on the freeway and become unable to drive, again ending a career. I felt as if I had completely lost my mind. For a time, I managed to keep it together on the outside, but then I became unable to leave my house again.

Around this time I was diagnosed with PTSD. I cannot express to you the enormous relief I felt when I discovered my condition was real and treatable. I felt safe for the first time in 32 years. Taking medication and undergoing behavioral therapy marked the turning point in my regaining control of my life I'm rebuilding a satisfying career as an artist, and I am enjoying my life. The world is new to me and not limited by the restrictive vision of anxiety. It amazes me to think back to what my life was like only a year ago, and just how far I've come.

For me there is no cure, no final healing. But there are things I can do to ensure that I never have to suffer as I did before being diagnosed with PTSD. I'm no longer at the mercy of my disorder and I would not be here today had I not had the proper diagnosis and treatment. The most important thing to know is that it's never too late to seek help.

This interview is available online at:

<https://adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/personal-stories/my-story-survival-battling-ptsd>

Tarhata's Story:



“My patients are some of the strongest people I know. They are definitely not alone.”

Tarhata Brazsal experienced rape and intimate partner violence from her high school boyfriend. After the relationship ended, Tarhata told her sister and cousin about what had happened.

“I believed this was a normal thing that happened in relationships. The environment I was raised in catered to what boys and men wanted. I was used to living in a cultural and social perspective of masculine dominance with women being quiet and obedient.”

Though she is glad she disclosed the abuse, Tarhata says speaking about it brought up many difficult emotions. “There were a lot of after-effects. The rapes kept coming into my mind like a broken record. I could not function. It felt like the PTSD, shaking, anxiety, paranoia, anorexia, and suicidal thoughts had completely taken over my life.”

Some of the people Tarhata trusted most blamed her for what happened, insulted her, and made her feel ashamed for telling the truth of what happened to her. Many of them knew the perpetrator and chose to believe his side of the story. “No one wants to believe that a person they know and believe is a ‘good guy,’ would do something like this.” After getting through that difficult period, she found herself surrounded by the people who had stood by her and supported her. “After years, I eventually found people who were healthy and safe. I found out who my real friends and family were, and I let the others go.”

Several months after telling her sister, she told a close friend of hers who reacted in a supportive way. Her friend told her that it may be helpful to share her story with others. “I owe everything to that friend. He wanted to hear my story and told me that others wanted to hear it, too.”

The next day she found herself in her friend’s former high school, prepared to share her story in front of a group of students. “I started telling my story and soon realized that absolutely no one was paying attention. None of them were taking me seriously. I got angrier and angrier. I was so mad that nobody was listening; I just wanted to be heard. Fifteen minutes in, I remember banging my fist on the desk, yelling at them. That’s when they started listening.”

Tarhata was worried that she had acted inappropriately, so she was surprised the next day to find messages on her phone of love, support, and gratitude for telling her story. Because of hearing Tarhata’s story, several of the students had gone to the school counselor to discuss their own experiences of sexual violence for the first time. “That’s when I found my voice—and I’ve been sharing my story ever since.”

Tarhata has blended her career as a nurse with her mission of sharing her story and advocating for other survivors by becoming a sexual assault forensic nurse examiner. She finds immense fulfillment and purpose in doing everything she can to create a trauma-informed, patient-focused experience for those under her care. “When I’m called into a case, I am totally about the patient. I look at them through a lens of amazement at how strong they are and how much wisdom they have,” Tarhata says. “At the end of every interaction I let them know how much I admire them to sit there with me and go through an entire exam after having been through such a traumatic experience. My patients are some of the strongest people I know. They are definitely not alone. I do my best to tell them this and honor their strength.”

To best support survivors, Tarhata says, we should just listen. “Listen and let survivors speak their truth. It seems simple, but it takes a lot of patience, introspection, and selflessness.” She emphasizes that it is important not to ask survivors details of their experience, rather to let them tell their story in whatever way they choose and at whatever time they choose. “Offer yourself to be part of their healing process but do it on their timeline.”

Tarhata knows from her own experience that patient and non-judgmental listening can be truly healing. Her sister has been her biggest advocate, listener, and supporter throughout her healing process. After learning of the sexual assault, Tarhata’s sister did not pressure her to go to the police, but instead she listened and waited for Tarhata to feel ready to report it. “She didn’t make me do anything I didn’t want to do. She waited until I was ready. She gave me the power of choice. Everyone was trying to make me do what they thought would help me. People were trying to force me to act in a certain way, but my sister didn’t. Because of that, she truly gave me my voice back.” In addition to going with her to all of her medical appointments and counseling sessions, her sister would also help her continue eating even when Tarhata felt like she couldn’t. “I was too paranoid to do the simplest things like going to the grocery store. My sister would often come by and give me food, knowing that I had absolutely nothing in the fridge.”

Tarhata remembers one incident in particular in which her sister's support saved her life when she was experiencing a period of depression and suicidal thoughts. "I was driving over the Bay Bridge in San Francisco, and I wanted to drive myself off the overpass. I turned the wheel and was about to do it. But then I thought about my sister and how she listened to me, and I decided not to go through with it," says Tarhata. "She may not have been there, but she saved my life."

Another important aspect of Tarhata's healing has been finding the strength to spend time outside again. "I had been indoors for so long and hadn't been eating, so I was really pale and my cheeks were sunken in. I felt so ashamed, and I was paranoid about people seeing me." She started by going on walks around the park, and when she got her rescue dog, Bonkers, he motivated her to continue spending time outdoors. "My dog was everything to me. When I was scared to go outside, he would walk with me. When I didn't eat, he would eat with me. Everything that made me feel uneasy, he would be the one to keep me calm. Bonkers came to all of my speaking events—everyone knew him. It's funny how a little rescue dog can rescue you."

A few years later when Tarhata's friends started having children and she and her husband had their son, she realized there was a lack of engaging and appropriate children books about healthy touch and relationships. She also found that the books that did exist did not feature any characters of color, something that had been a barrier for her seeing herself in characters in children's books when she was growing up and did not want her son to struggle with.

She decided to talk to parents and teachers about where students were learning about healthy touch and relationships. Students said they wished they learned more about this. There was a gap between teachers who thought that parents would talk to their children at home, and parents who thought teachers would educate students on the topics at school. Tarhata decided to do something about this—she conducted research and wrote her master's thesis on a nurse-led program for elementary school students on healthy bodies and relationships. She then wrote an illustrated children's book that will soon also be available in Spanish and Tagalog.

She recommends to parents that they reframe consent in child-friendly language and start talking about it early. "Consent is needed in every social setting. For kids, consent can be about sharing crayons with a classmate. I also like to use the concept of 'red light, green light' to talk about consent." She says that some people resist talking to kids about these topics because they do not discuss sex yet, but Tarhata says it's about learning respect, boundaries, and appropriate touch—which can be discussed at any age and applied to many topics.

"What is motivating me right now is that I am a mother. Everything that I am doing is not just for me or other adults, it's because I want my son to be a good human being. This is my way of passing on leadership to the next generation and giving them the tools they need. The spotlight is now on them, and I'm excited for their future."

“What’s my call to action? It’s for individuals and our society as a whole to be open and talk about this. Discussing sexual assault used to be so taboo. As a society, we are healing together.”

Tarhata’s Story and many more interviews available at:
<https://www.rainn.org/survivor-stories/tarhata-story>

Thank you very much for your witness here. Metta...