

CHAPTER ONE | What Is Trauma?

TRAUMA IS THE MOST AVOIDED, ignored, denied, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering. When I use the word *trauma*, I am talking here about the often debilitating symptoms that many people suffer from in the aftermath of *perceived* life-threatening or overwhelming experiences. Recently, *trauma* has been used as a buzzword to replace everyday stress, as in, “I had a traumatic day at work.” However, this use is completely misleading. While it is true that all traumatic events are stressful, all stressful events are not traumatic.

UNIQUE TO EACH INDIVIDUAL

When it comes to trauma, no two people are exactly alike. What proves harmful over the long term to one person may be exhilarating to another.

There are many factors involved in the wide range of response to threat. These responses depend upon genetic make-up, an individual's history of trauma, even his or her family dynamics. It is vital that we appreciate these differences. Simply knowing that certain kinds of early childhood experiences can severely diminish our ability to cope and be present in the world may elicit compassion and support rather than harsh judgment, both for ourselves and for others.

Perhaps the most important thing I have learned about trauma is that people, especially children, can be overwhelmed by what we usually think of as common everyday events. Until recently, our understanding of trauma was limited to “shell-shocked” soldiers who have been devastated by war, victims of severe abuse or violence, and those who have suffered catastrophic accidents and injuries. This narrow view could not be further from the truth.

The fact is that, over time, a series of seemingly minor mishaps can have a damaging effect on a person. *Trauma does not have to stem from a major catastrophe.* Some common triggering events include:

- Automobile accidents (even fender benders)
- Routine invasive medical procedures
- Loss of loved ones
- Natural disasters, such as earthquakes and hurricanes

Even falling off a bicycle can be overwhelming to a child under certain circumstances. We will discuss those circumstances later. For now, I will simply say that almost all of us have experienced some form of trauma, either directly or indirectly.

For this reason, I sincerely believe that just about everyone can benefit from doing the Twelve-Phase Healing Trauma Program that you'll find in this book and on the accompanying CD.

People often ask me to define *trauma*. After thirty years, this is still a challenge. What I do know is that we become traumatized when our ability to respond to a *perceived* threat is in some way overwhelmed. This inability to adequately respond can impact us in obvious ways, as well as ways that are subtle.

Trauma can, in fact, impact us in ways that don't show up for years. For example, a traumatized war veteran who jumps every time a car backfires is clearly responding to gunfire that he experienced in the past. When a person who suffered torture and confinement breaks out in a cold sweat while riding in a crowded elevator, it is also easy to see the link. However, many, if not most of us, who have been overwhelmed by a series of less dramatic events have responses that are not so obvious.

In short, trauma is about loss of connection — to ourselves, to our bodies, to our families, to others, and to the world around us. This loss of connection is often hard to recognize, because it doesn't happen all at once. It can happen slowly, over time, and we adapt to these subtle changes sometimes without even noticing them. These are the hidden effects of trauma, the ones most of us keep to ourselves. We may simply sense that we do not feel quite right, without ever becoming fully aware of what is taking place; that is, the gradual undermining of our self-esteem, self-confidence, feelings of well-being, and connection to life.

Our choices become limited as we avoid certain feelings, people, situations, and places. The result of this gradual constriction of freedom is the loss of vitality and potential for the fulfillment of our dreams.

A NEW LOOK AT HEALING

The field of psychiatric medicine has chosen to view many of the long-term effects of trauma as an incurable disease, only marginally controllable by drugs or through behavioral management. I do not agree. While medications can at times be quite helpful, they are — of themselves — insufficient.

In working with trauma for over three decades, I have come to the conclusion that human beings are born with an innate capacity to triumph over trauma. I believe not only that trauma is curable, but that the healing process can be a catalyst for profound awakening — a portal opening to emotional and genuine spiritual transformation. I have little doubt that as individuals, families, communities, and even nations, we have the capacity to learn how to heal and prevent much of the damage done by trauma. In so doing, we will significantly increase our ability to achieve both our individual and collective dreams