

Article 3: Trauma / Counseling Issues for Child and Family

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When trouble comes home to roost in a family, particularly through incidents of child abuse, family violence, sexual assault, or other traumatic events – two things tend to happen right away. Family patterns and routines are dramatically disrupted and every family member tries to understand the full extent of the impact on their world.

Even simple routines like school and work can be seriously affected. Families can be split on the issues. Concentration wanes. Focus is disrupted. Parents talk to their best friends about it, the children talk to each other about it, and victims, if they are able to talk about it at all, talk to their closest friends and confidants. They vent, they commiserate with each other, they get angry at what the bad guy did, angry with the bad luck, or angry with the culprit of circumstance. From these family members, friends, and close associates, a distraught family can get perhaps encouragement, sometimes advice, and depending on the quality of the confidant, some insightful guidance as to what they need to do to survive the crisis – and manage a more long-term recovery.

Unfortunately, these situations are new to most people and in spite of the best intentions, these friends and confidants frequently can't offer much more than generalized support. The vast majority rarely have backgrounds in crisis intervention, crisis management, trauma related issues, or recovery. And don't assume that's a slap on those friends. *Most people* don't have that background of experience, and that fact doesn't mean those individuals can't be helpful. It simply means they have their limits.

Though a great many people seek – and are helped by – professional counseling each year, there are still numerous families that don't trust counselors, have had bad experiences with counselors, or have grown up in a family that had no respect for the notion of “airing one's dirty laundry in public, much less to a *shrink*.” There are also families, though they wouldn't likely admit it, that are afraid of anyone on the outside seeing the emotional inner workings of their home, for any number of unsettling reasons.

Though I understand the reluctance to counseling at times, there is an irony involved. The vast majority of those individuals who don't trust counseling rarely have much first hand experience on the subject. And it follows, that due to their negative “notions” about counseling, they refuse to

get help for their children. Sometimes their strategy and advice to their children is to “forget it and move on.” One problem with that strategy is that “forgetting” a sexual assault, or child abuse, or the violent death of a parent is not a reasonable goal. Human memory doesn’t tend to work that way. Typically, these events will never be forgotten.

Recovering from trauma related to child abuse or violence has nothing to do with forgetting, and everything to do with learning to live well in spite of the event. It has little to do with “airing dirty family laundry” and everything to do with discussing and learning healthy balances, developing healthy perceptions, and getting involved in healthy activities.

The human psyche can be delicate, and the younger the age, the greater the delicacy seems to be. Yet, we also know that trauma can deliver knock-out punches even to adults, depending on the circumstances at the time. And any time trauma strikes, one can almost certainly be assured that some symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) will surface.

PTSD is a well-documented collection of symptoms that can manifest when human beings are subjected to any kind of traumatic event, or sequence of highly-stressful events.

Some symptoms can be dramatic, and others can be quite subtle, but anyone who knows the victim – and is paying attention – will likely see the symptoms begin to manifest themselves. Each individual is different, and will have varied collections of symptoms and varying degrees of each. Some of these PTSD symptoms are listed here to familiarize the reader with information they can look for in a victim of trauma.

- * Dramatic loss of, or increase in appetite
- * Extreme nervousness, or anxiety
- * Difficulty falling to sleep, or staying asleep
- * Repeatedly waking up due to scary, even terrifying nightmares
- * Sudden onset of discomfort to a trigger that was previously not a trigger to anxiety (i.e., the need to flee a crowded area, sudden fear of a relative, neighbor, or location)
- * Development of an eating disorder (starving oneself, or eating well beyond former habits)
- * Dramatic decrease in memory function (particularly short-term memory)
- * Difficulty staying focused, as for reading, and poor recall of context
- * Paranoia and other irrational fears
- * A strong sense that “others know” what has happened
- * Loss of interest in activities that were previously enjoyed. (dropping out of band, sports)
- * Drop in grades at school, or a drop in performance on the job
- * Loss of the sense of joy or sadness (flat affect)
- * Severe and lasting depression
- * Self-injurious behavior, such as cutting, scratching, or burning oneself to relieve stress
- * Sudden bouts of rage and anger, frequently out of proportion to current circumstances
- * Difficulty with all relationships, including work, friendship, and romantic types
- * Fear of going crazy (due to odd shifts in behavior, loss of memory, strange thoughts, etc.)

It's also important to note that when a person manifests one or even a few of these symptoms, it does not mean they have PTSD. It's probably safe to say that the more symptoms you experience, the greater the odds are that you may have the disorder. Ultimately, however, it takes a trained and licensed professional to diagnose the disorder.

I mention PTSD in an article about counseling because I have seen many people, adults and children alike, who entered counseling due to traumatic events and were exhibiting and complaining about some or many of these symptoms every day. In victims of child abuse and family violence, it's a common problem.

Though it seems true that some symptoms can moderate and fade over time, with or without counseling help, it is equally true that some can linger for years, even a lifetime, and have the power to greatly influence one's life in very negative ways. That's one reason rape crisis centers sometimes report that women in their forties or fifties come in for counseling in spite of the fact that they were raped when they were teenagers. They come in because they are still being haunted by the experience and have finally gotten tired of trying to manage it on their own.

Naturally, having been a crisis counselor for many years, I support counseling in general. But I also support not going into it blindly. The following tips, should you decide to seek counseling, might help you find the right counselor for your situation:

1. Decide if you will pay for your own counseling, use insurance, or will be eligible for Victim's Compensation (contact local District Attorney's Office for info). If you have insurance, there are some insurance policies which pay for part or all counseling charges, and many counselors work with insurance carriers.

(Note) Private Licensed Professional Counselors and Therapists typically charge between \$75 and \$150 per hour in the Hill Country and see clients on a weekly basis, or as needed.

2. Use word of mouth, call school counselors, call local counseling centers, or any other resource you might have to identify various counseling resources in your area. If money is an issue, mention that when searching. It helps others steer you in the right direction.

3. Decide if you are looking for a counselor to work with your entire family, your children, or just you. This will help you narrow the specialties required by any future counselor.

4. Determine if a male or female therapist is required, or if gender doesn't matter. Finding a qualified, experienced counselor is usually more important than gender anyway.

5. Once you have a short list of possible counselors, call each one and have in front of you a short, written description of your situation and any questions you might have regarding payment, insurance, the counselor's experience, or important time frames. Don't go into great detail about

your situation, but never be afraid to ask about their experience in the area of trauma, PTSD, child abuse or whatever issues you are bringing to the table.

6. Even over the phone, you can get a fairly significant “feel” for a counselor through a short conversation to explain your situation. If you like what you hear, set up an appointment, and go from there. The idea is to find a counselor you or your child can relate to, and one that has experience with the problems you are presenting.

As a final note, trauma and its associated conditions should be viewed as a tricky, potentially difficult collective result of any kind of traumatic event or events. Because related symptoms can be subtle, it is wise to consider professional counseling for yourself, and any children involved. The path to recovery can be very difficult to identify and maintain, but human beings tend to be very resilient and with a little experienced help, most forms of trauma can be overcome. Have faith and take one step at a time. Better days can be just around the bend.