

From Surviving to Thriving: Resolving Traumas, Achieving Health Goals

By J. Louise Newton, MSW, LCSW

“Posttraumatic stress is not about the past—it’s about a body that continues to behave and organize itself as if the trauma is happening now.”

—Bessel van der Kolk, MD

Do you remember the last time someone unexpectedly cut you off while you were driving? For just a fraction of a moment you may have felt in danger until you realized that it was merely a close call. In that instant you most likely held your breath, your heart beat very quickly, and your eyes darted around assessing the situation until you could relax your grip on the steering wheel, realizing all was well.

In these moments, the human body responds to perceived threat just as it is exquisitely designed to do and then successfully settles back to its baseline equilibrium. But what if you survived a threat that resulted in serious injury, was truly overwhelming to your system, or was chronic and long-lasting in its nature?

Many of us experience traumas in our life such as the unexpected loss of a loved one or surviving a natural disaster. We know that the majority of people who experience single-incident traumas do not develop post-traumatic stress disorder. People without a previous history of trauma who also have adequate support and receive appropriate responses have the best chance of enduring the event and not acquiring ongoing symptoms.

But those of us who have endured multiple traumas and do not have proper resiliency factors are more likely to notice a complex set of symptoms such as nightmares, intrusive thoughts and reliving of the events, numbing or hyper-sensitivity, anxiety, depression, and an inclination towards substance abuse. We also now know that there are a constellation of physical health complications that are correlated to over-exposure to trauma in early development.



THE ACES STUDY

The groundbreaking Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is a longitudinal study that tracked patients’ self-reports of exposure to childhood trauma and medical health outcomes. The data were collected from over 17,000 primary care patients who were given an ACEs score based on how many developmental traumas they may have endured—such as parents who suffered from addiction or mental illness; surviving physical, verbal, and sexual abuse experiences as a child; witnessing domestic violence; and neglect. Health outcomes of the ACEs Study indicate not just an increase in mental illness and addiction late in life. The study designates a correlation of high ACEs score and obesity, cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal complications, chronic migraines, and difficult-to-treat syndromes such as chronic fatigue.

Let us now return to our near brush with the car accident. For many people suffering from the trauma of such ACEs,

it’s as if their bodies are always in that car accident. We know that if you are operating from a physiological threat response as your baseline, achieving basic health goals can be next to impossible. Imagine how difficult it would be to achieve your weight loss goal if you were in the threat response and your cortisol levels were elevated—which we know affects metabolism and your body’s blood sugars, for example.

What we also know is that there are several new, gentle, and evidence-based modalities to help people resolve their traumas for overall holistic health such as acupuncture, yoga, and Somatic Experiencing therapy. Historically, psychotherapists have required their patients to tell and re-tell their stories which we now know can re-traumatize the patient. Somatic Experiencing is a gentle therapy based on neuro-biology that supports the body’s innate ability to heal. In a few Somatic Experiencing sessions one’s body can learn that the trauma is over and begin to experience that it is safer to return to their equilibrium. By grounding into a more coherent self you may not only enjoy more clear and serene mental wellness, but you can more effectively reach your health goals. **hkt**

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