
PERSONAL WELL-BEING OF PEACEMAKERS

I – Stress & Trauma Awareness

Given that our ministry as peacemakers places us in the midst of conflict, it is important to recognize the stresses inherent in the work and our vulnerability to them. Peacemakers are frequently “knee-deep in trauma” and need to develop a culture of self-care as individuals, teams and an organization so as to ensure healthy awareness, practice, resilience and healing strategies.

Stress & Burnout

Stress is a normal part of our lives. It is the pressure or tension we experience when faced with a demand that challenges our ability to cope with or manage our lives. Stress mobilizes us to attend to a task at hand which, once accomplished, provides real satisfaction. However, prolonged exposure to stress can easily lead to emotional exhaustion – something to which peacemakers are quite prone. The cumulative effect of stress experienced over a long period of time can lead to “burnout.”

Burnout is a process which begins gradually and becomes progressively worse. It includes physical, emotional, behavioral, work-related and interpersonal symptoms. In section III we will look at some healthy practices peacemakers can adopt to help reduce emotional exhaustion and burnout even while living under the continual stress of a war zone.

Overwhelming & Traumatic Stress

Sometimes one can't cope. The stress is overwhelming – beyond one's capabilities to handle. Such overwhelming stress produces severe “distress” with symptoms of panic, rage and depression. Long term, this can become the tipping point for suicide. If the overwhelming stress causes or threatens serious injury or death, to oneself or others, it is described as traumatic. Car accidents, plane crashes, falling off a cliff, fire, flood, hurricane, serious illness or surgery, sudden loss of a loved one, physical assault, sexual assault, rape and torture are all examples of such trauma. We will look first at the normal human reaction to traumatic stress.

Acute Traumatic Stress Reaction

When a person senses a life threatening danger there is an instinctual preparation for fight or flight. Adrenaline flows, breathing and heart speed up, vision and hearing become focused, and survival mode takes over. However, when one is overwhelmed by trauma and neither fight or flight is an option, then our bodies move into “freeze” mode. We hold this defense mechanism in common with all animals. When an animal survives trauma it goes through a period of shaking which belatedly releases the pent up energy of the “fight or flight” mode. Humans are more complex and the calming down of the supercharged nervous system often takes different forms and more time.

The “fight or flight” energy must be discharged and it is normal to experience the

following sorts of reactions: physical – hyper-arousal, startle reactions; emotional – fear, anger, depression; cognitive – flashbacks, nightmares; behavioural – crying, loss of appetite; spiritual – loss of meaning, cynicism. Healing requires that the feelings, emotions, memories and meaning of the trauma be processed. In section II we will look at first aid techniques for such a traumatized person and in section III some strategies for building resilience and for healing of persistent traumatic stress reactions (those which continue beyond 30 days are described as a *post* traumatic stress reactions).

On-Going and Secondary Traumatic Stress

To be caught in a war zone for long periods of time – a lifetime for many of the young people we work with on project – is to be exposed to on-going traumatization in which the normal traumatic stress reactions become chronic. These are the folk we work with as peacemakers – traumatized individuals, families and whole communities. Hence the need for peacemakers to be cognizant of trauma and its effects. But there is more. If one works with the traumatized, witnesses the trauma, listens to the stories and documents them, and returns home to retell their stories one runs a high risk of secondary trauma – absorbing, so to speak, their traumatic stress and suffering the same acute traumatic reactions.

Compassion Fatigue

As peacemakers we deliberately place ourselves in places of conflict and stand in solidarity with those suffering violent oppression. Therefore we should not be surprised when we exhibit the same effects of trauma as the oppressed. The cumulative effect of this secondary trauma, experienced because we care, has been coined “compassion fatigue” by trauma therapists doing research in the field. Below are quotes from two such researchers.

“There is a soul-weariness that comes with caring, from daily doing business with the handiwork of fear. Sometimes it lives at the edges of life, brushing against hope and barely making its presence known. At other times, it comes crashing in, overtaking one with its vivid images of another’s terror, with its profound demands for attention; nightmares, strange fears, and generalized hopelessness.” *Beth Hudnall Stamm (Secondary Traumatic Stress)*

“Compassion Fatigue is ... stress resulting from helping, or wanting to help, a traumatized or suffering person ... the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowledge about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other ... a syndrome of symptoms nearly identical to PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] except that exposure to a traumatizing event experienced by one person becomes a traumatizing event for a second person ... the natural, predictable, treatable and preventable unwanted consequence of working with suffering people.” *Charles Figley (Compassion Fatigue)*

Compassion Satisfaction

There is also great satisfaction in sharing the experience of traumatized persons. It deepens one’s understanding and sensitivity towards those with whom one is standing in solidarity. It gives a renewed sense of meaning to the ministry of peacemaking and working for justice. It connects the peacemaker with all of suffering humanity and underline dramatically the importance of all life.

II – The Victim/Survivor Cycle

When the trauma is suffered from an act of aggression, the effects can be cyclic leading to violent aggressive retaliation on the part of the victim/survivor. The descriptions below refer to the accompanying diagrams from STAR (Seminar on Trauma Awareness and Recovery) presented by the Conflict Transformation Program at Eastern Mennonite University.

Trauma Energy Turned Painfully Inward

The trauma, the shock and the pain, with the concomitant physiological changes, generate feelings of panic as one realizes one's loss, humiliation and anger, shame and guilt. Grief and fear are so strong that one feels the need to avoid anything that might trigger their return. The helplessness experienced slides easily into a loss of hope and meaning in one's life. This is painful stuff and suppression and denial are normal. There is no linear progression, feelings ebb and flow.

Trauma Energy Turned Aggressively Outward

With trauma energy swirling in the instinctual brain needing release, anger and rage in the emotional brain needing vindication and confusion in the rational brain needing justice, it is an easy movement from a desire for justice to seeking revenge. A toxic narrative of good versus evil can lead quickly to dehumanization of the enemy and justification for violent retaliation. This completes the cycle – the victim becomes the aggressor, the abused becomes the abuser. This pattern is embedded in our culture in the Myth of Redemptive Violence – the innocent victim finds the will to defend self and seek violent revenge against the evil aggressor.

The Victim/Survivor Cycle is often experienced in the lives of individuals but it all too often finds expression in societies as a whole. National traumas can be memorialized in unhealthy ways which foster a myth of victimhood. It is a short step to dehumanizing the enemies and justifying aggressive action against them.

The Healing Journey

Peter Levine in Waking the Tiger outlines the important elements in giving emotional first aid to a person recently traumatized. On the physical level the person may be experiencing adrenaline rush, shaking, numbness, feeling hot, chills and tears: assurance that these reactions are normal and indeed helpful in releasing trauma energy is what is needed from the helper. On the emotional level waves of anger, fear, grief, anxiety, humiliation, shame and guilt may come and go: encouragement to allow these feelings, without judgement, is needed and if the physical reactions return that is all to the good. On the cognitive level the person will need to tell the story, to access, understand and give meaning to the trauma: nonjudgmental listening as the person debriefs is what helps and a return of strong feelings and even physical reactions can be expected and must be respected.

Breaking the Cycle

Three conditions are necessary for the healing needed to break out of the cycle of violence. A place and time of physical and emotional safety, social and spiritual support from teammates, friends, family or counselor, and an awareness of the effects of trauma and of healing options. These conditions make possible a moving away from the desire for revenge and retaliation.

The loss caused by trauma is real and needs to be mourned and accepted for healing to take place. True grieving requires healthy memorializing that facilitates sadness being integrated into one's life. On-going fears need to be named and confronted and a decision to heal taken. It is a major stride forward when one can grieve the victims on both sides of the conflict.

Personal truth telling is restorative of the human spirit. Healthy story telling includes, besides the facts of the trauma, the feelings, fears and doubts as well. Healing is hastened as recognition dawns of one's own strength and resilience which is evident in successful survival of the trauma. The goal is to incorporate the traumatic event into a strong new identity. Healthy story telling requires active listeners who provide information, support and a faith dimension, who ask key questions, suggest new ways of seeing things and open new options.

The toxic narrative of good versus evil that dehumanizes the enemy and leads to the justification of retaliatory aggression must be challenged by a deeper understanding of the root causes behind the aggressor's actions. Healing is well on the way when the traumatized person can begin to let go of the victim role and instead of asking "Why me?" ask "Why them?" and begin to redefine the aggressor as a human person also victimized by the conflict. This opens up space for the risk of re-engagement.

The gospel values of forgiveness and reconciliation, when embraced, complete the healing process. But forgiveness is hard, demanding a great act of courage. It is not forgetting about the aggression nor forsaking the quest for justice. It is an act of letting go of the aggressor's control over your life and moving on. And for peacemakers, it's moving on towards reconciliation – love of enemy in action – seeking creative ways of establishing a just peace between victims and aggressors.