

Tool 2

First Aid for Psychological Trauma and Shock

IN THE FIRST CHAPTER we covered the roadmap for traumatic terrain in the body-mind, the developmental stages of healing from trauma. But, what if you or someone you know is in the middle of something big—immediate and terrifying? There is no time to call anyone, or help may be on the way, but your help is needed right now. What do you do? What can you do? Practical interventions for trauma shock fall into four categories: grounding, clearing, restoring, and altering/suppression. Some of the interventions below will be expanded in subsequent chapters. Use this chapter as the first-aid kit it is meant to be, providing ways to deal safely with overwhelming trauma and stress in the moment, when time is of the essence.

GROUNDING

When the mind is assaulted by overwhelming events that threaten our feeling of well-being and safety, the body tends to go into

lockdown mode automatically and becomes filled with overwhelming tension and adrenaline. The breath is held or becomes very shallow and rapid, which can lead to a feeling of light-headedness. These automatic reactions are part of the “fight/flight/freeze” response and are unconscious and largely out of our control—at first. If this breathing pattern persists past a couple of minutes, it causes a negative cascade of events in the body—one being the perpetuation of stress and tension. If prolonged for months to years, it can start to affect the entire circulatory system adversely.

Let us focus on breathing because you always have your breath with you. There are several breathing exercises that are immediately helpful to unlock the body’s response of extreme tension and facilitate regulation back to a normal state.

Circular Breath Technique

The beautiful part of this exercise is that it can be done anywhere and anytime:

Sit in a comfortable upright position on the floor or on a chair or sofa: if on the floor, cross your legs or, if you are a yoga practitioner, place them in a half-lotus position. If you are seated on a chair or a sofa, place your feet flat on the floor. Gently and without force, inhale naturally and count the seconds or “beats” of your inhale. Most people can count six to eight beats, but more or less is fine. At the top of your inhale, the point when you want to exhale, hold the breath for the same number of beats as the inhale. This may feel a little strange or even uncomfortable, but it is an important part of the exercise. Gently exhale, again for the same number of beats. Do not force air out or blow vigorously; just allow the breath to exit naturally from your lungs. At the end of the beats, even if all the air

is not released, hold the breath again for the same number of beats. I highly recommend counting to yourself throughout the exercise so you can maintain the evenness of the flow of breath. You may say to yourself: Inhale, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, hold, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, exhale slowly, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, hold, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 . . .

This breathing exercise acts like a reset button for the nervous system. I have been with people in full-blown traumatic reactions and have watched them come right down out of trauma shock in seconds to minutes using this technique. The reason this exercise initially feels uncomfortable is that you are actively going against the physiology of your body in the moment to change the trauma pattern. At first the body will resist you, but you must persist to gain the calmer state. If the count pattern is too short or too long, alter it after *one full cycle*. The most important thing is to keep the counts even for all four parts of the breath. Continue until you begin to feel calmer.

Belly Breathing

This exercise is designed to move from shallow (apical) breathing to deep breathing. If you ever watch a puppy or a baby sleep deeply, you can easily observe the rhythmic deep breath moving in the belly. We lose this natural state of relaxation as we mature and live more in the mind and less naturally in the body.

This breath has three distinct stages. You are going to imagine filling up the body with air the way you would fill a glass of water—from the bottom up—and then expanding the glass with air sideways, and then finally emptying the breath from the top down as if you are emptying the glass. It might be helpful to first practice each stage separately and then string them together.

The first stage is to inhale into the lowest part of the belly. Of course air will not go into your actual stomach (at least not this way) but when the diaphragm, which sits under the lungs, expands, it feels as if it is pushing air into the belly. Ideally you would begin filling about two inches below the belly button. If you are a Tai Chi practitioner you will know this area as the tan tien. Most people have trouble sensing this area of the body, so begin by placing your hand lightly on your stomach directly over your belly button. Through your hand you can feel the movement of the belly. Now breathe deeply and intentionally into this space. If you are breathing deeply and correctly, you will feel your hand rise with the inhale and fall with the exhale. Possibly you are one of the many people who actually breathe in the opposite way: sucking in your belly as you breathe in and forcing it out as you breathe out. If you are, just notice it, pause, and try again to push your hand out gently with the inbreath.

The second stage is breathing the rib cage. Your lungs are, of course, surrounded by this marvelous bone structure, and in between and around the ribs are sets of muscles that move, expanding and relaxing with each breath. To get a sense of how this system works, sit with your back against a wall or solid surface. Some people breathe up and down, raising their shoulders with each breath (and creating a lot of tension in the process). You will want to get a feeling for breathing “sideways,” expanding the ribs horizontally and relaxing with each exhalation.

The final stage is apical breathing, breathing at the top of the chest and lungs. It is the breath we automatically use when we are stressed or in pain and every breath hurts. We also use this breath to repress and manage intense feelings. The muscles of the chest and neck, rather than the diaphragm, are used to breathe in and out shallowly. Using this breath after the first two is like topping off. The three stages complete a full inbreath. Breathing out we empty the glass by pouring out the air at the top from the upper lungs, releasing held air in the lower lungs with

the rib cage, and finally expelling the last bits of carbon dioxide–laden air using the deep belly exhalation.

This breath has the effect of replenishing fresh air in the lungs, getting us out of stuck breathing patterns created by stress, and forcing a relaxation response in the body. When this breath is used in the face of traumatic shock, it often has the effect of unsticking the emotional logjam. It is not unusual to weep, shout, or feel rage as the breath frees up emotions we have been deliberately or unconsciously holding in. Allow your emotions to unfold safely. Keep breathing through any emotional release you may be having. As with any exercise in this book, use your own good judgment about when the time and place are right for you to use this breathing technique, and make sure you have enough support for you to do this work. You may feel more comfortable doing it alone, or you may prefer the support of a partner, close friend, or family member who can be with you or talk you through this exercise.

Progressive Relaxation

If you have taken yoga or stress-management classes, chances are you have already done this type of relaxation exercise. In addition to releasing trauma shock, progressive relaxation works spectacularly well with chest pain of unknown etiology. I have had patients experience complete remission of symptoms in two weeks when doing this technique as recommended. It works with the breath and the parasympathetic nervous system to evoke a profound relaxation response. I recommend doing this exercise one to two times daily, in the morning and/or the evening before sleep. You can do this in ten minutes or forty-five or longer, depending on how slowly you move through each body part. It is extremely effective and has been well

researched. Progressive relaxation can also be used sitting up in an office, in a waiting room, etc. *Please do not do this exercise when driving!*

Begin by tensing the toes and releasing. Imagine your toes are relaxing and getting warm and heavy. They are fully relaxed now at the end of your feet. Next feel your feet; if it helps, you can tense up the muscles in the feet and then release. Your feet are getting warmer and heavier. The blood is circulating and relaxing your feet, which now want to sink deeper into the ground. Next your ankles are getting relaxed. You can imagine warm water or oil being poured over them, creating a feeling of deep relaxation. Keep this dialog going up the body with specific body parts: calves, shins, knees, thighs, hamstring muscles, pelvis, lower back, stomach, middle back, upper back, lungs, heart, chest, shoulders, upper arms, lower arms, hands, fingers, neck, throat, back of the head, face, forehead, scalp, and so on.

You may end up falling asleep in this exercise, and that is perfectly okay. The idea here is to unwind and dismantle the trauma tension piece by piece. If you are very traumatized and in shock, it may be hard to feel certain parts of your body at first. That is fine; just visualizing the exercise in the mind will have a beneficial and measurable effect. For an even deeper effect, you may want to make a recording of this exercise with favorite background music.

Dissociating and Reconnecting

A universal aspect of encountering an overwhelming event is a feeling of disconnecting from your own body, which can be additionally distressing. People describe this state by saying things such as “I felt weird,” “I couldn’t feel my body,” “My body was numb,” “I was beside myself.” Some people even describe out-of-body experiences.

There can be a sense that everything has become surreal or that you are in somebody else's story or in a movie or even that you are floating up in the corner of the room! Another name for this disconnection is dissociation. It is important to understand the dissociation as negative space; it's what isn't there. I used to have a patient who dissociated every time he tried to remember the word "dissociation"; he would laugh and say, "What's that word again?" I would have to name it for him every single time. But dissociation is no laughing matter.

A state of being ungrounded or dissociated is *one of the least recognized and least understood symptoms of trauma*. It is very hard to spot with the untrained eye because it is an absence rather than a presence. In contrast, other states, like rage or panic, are very easy to detect. Disconnection and dissociation can actually look like calmness, and the victim may seem to be managing well. Physical signs of dissociation can include, but are not limited to, a fixed or inward gaze, pupils fixed in a dilated or constricted position, a flattened affect (nonexpressive emotionally), sighing, shallow breathing, physical rigidity, and noticeably decreased or increased motor activity, the latter more common in children. Cognitive signs present as a sudden inability to process information—forgetting what one was saying or not understanding concepts one usually understands, losing the ability to concentrate, "spacing out," changing the speech pattern, becoming mute, or talking overly rapidly.

When you are ungrounded your reality testing will become impaired. Accidents can happen more easily because the perceptual system is not fully online. Judgment can easily become faulty because to have good judgment your feelings have to be switched on. We can only feel our feelings if we are consciously connected up with our body. More importantly, we can only begin to release the traumatic dissociation by moving feelings through our bodies. To respond

effectively in any crisis, one must keep one's attention connected to the body, but in trauma shock the circuits are thrown and the mind and body temporarily disconnect!

Fortunately, there are many good ways to get grounded quickly and reestablish contact with your body, perceptual system, and judgment. But first, how do you know if you've dissociated? My favorite technique is to do a quick check by putting your feet flat on the floor. Can you feel them and their points of contact with the floor? Quickly scan up the body. Is there any area of the body you cannot feel? Can you feel your heart beating and your breath moving in and out? Can you identify your emotions? Can you feel body temperature, what kind of surface you are sitting on? I've seen people so profoundly dissociated that most of their body was numb, but not due to a physical numbness. Sometimes this state is accompanied by a feeling of internal coldness that no amount of heating up will fix. Doing this assessment is a grounding exercise in and of itself, because it brings the attention (and prana, or life force) back into the body.

CLEARING

In a trauma crisis the body is overwhelmed and feels taken over by what Peter Levine, in his remarkable book *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* has called the trauma vortex. In an emergency people feel as though they are in the middle of a swirling, disorienting, disturbing energy field. Sometimes this energy is so intense it can cause dizziness, nausea, or severe headaches. We can conceptualize this vortex as a trauma storm: a release of intensity around an event or memory that threatens to completely overwhelm the mind and body. Often people just retreat or collapse under the weight of such

intensity. Even therapists can end up feeling helpless or traumatized secondarily by this storm. Fortunately, there are some quick ways to reduce the intensity of the vortex or storm people find themselves in when they are processing trauma. Many of these techniques originate from indigenous cultures, some of which have been around on the earth for a very long time. Later in the book we will explore the origin and history of some of these methods and why they are so helpful.

Smudging

Possibly the best quick clear is smudging with sage or sweetgrass. It is traditional to ask God or Spirit to bless the plant before using. Some offer it to the six directions: north, south, east, west, above, and below. Take a smudging stick or break off a piece of dried sage (white sage is particularly potent) or sweetgrass. Light it, blow out the flame so it is smoking, and wave the smoke completely around the whole body: front and back, over and under. (It might be helpful to place the smudge in a fireproof bowl to preserve your carpet and your toes.) Sensitive people, including children, will feel relief instantly. Most healers I know use smudging on a regular basis for themselves, their clients, and their offices. Another technique is to crumple up a dried sage leaf, hold it before your nose, and inhale deeply; this instantly grounds the body and mind, with the bonus that to most people it smells really good!

Mineral/Epsom Salts

Salt baths are designed to pull toxins out of the body, and they help provide relief from intense trauma toxicity, relaxing both body and mind. I have found Dead Sea salts to be particularly effective, but any genuine mineral salts will do, and pharmacy-grade Epsom salts

can also provide some relief. Fill the tub with hot water, and put at least one cup of salts in the water. Soak for ten to twenty minutes. Too long a soak may make you feel drained. Occasionally people feel threatened by the bath or are worried about the amount of release from immersing the whole body, or they may not even have a bathtub. In that case, a simple footbath can also provide relief. Adjust the amount of salts used proportionately. If you use the footbath, be sure to visualize energy running down through the soles of the feet as described above in the grounding section.

Sprays and Essential Oils

Some products are available that provide essential oil blends in spray form. Sometimes people make their own blends. Use these sprays the way you would use the smudge stick, spraying all around the body and in your living area. Traditional healing fragrances include lavender and rose, but any fragrance that appeals to you can provide relief—just be sure it is not a triggering fragrance that reminds you of your trauma. Essential oils can be put in baths, on pillows, and directly onto the skin for aromatherapy. You can also use essential oils with a diffuser for longer-lasting aromatherapy.

Homeopathic Remedies

In the process of writing this book I interviewed naturopathic healers all over the United States, several of whom had worked in New York with 9/11 victims. They all agreed on two items that should be in everybody's first-aid kit at home: arnica montana and aconitum. These are available in natural health or food stores and online. They are over-the-counter remedies. Arnica is indicated if there is a physical component to the trauma—burns, bumps, bruises, sprains, etc. Aconitum is the remedy to alleviate the sudden shock of the

experience and is good in a wide variety of situations such as car accidents, abuse, falls, shocking news, etc. Use as directed on the label.

Tea

Chamomile is the hands-down favorite for a drink that is calming to mind and body. It is fine in a mix with other tea blends as long as the other ingredients don't increase agitation (as caffeine does).

Flower Essences

Many alternative-healing practitioners have familiarity with the Bach flower essences and especially the famous Rescue Remedy, a blend of several essences especially designed to work with stress and sudden shock. These essences are dripped in drops or dropperfuls under the tongue or taken with a small amount of liquid. Favorites for trauma shock are Rock Rose, Sweet Chestnut, and Star of Bethlehem, although many other remedies are also useful. When setting up your pharmacy at home, you can use intuition and kinesiology or the prescription of a naturopathic physician to discern which remedies are right for you. You cannot hurt yourself with the wrong remedy. They can be blended into one bottle for greater ease of use.

Herbal Remedies

These are best used under the supervision of a physician, either naturopathic or allopathic. They are more potent than homeopathic remedies and do have contraindications. Having said that, two herbal remedies are outstanding for anxiety and overwhelming stress. These are valerian and kava,¹ which come in a variety of preparations, including tinctures. Use as directed.

Incense

Your favorite incense can be a wonderful antidote to help clear the shock of a trauma. If you meditate regularly with it, the incense fragrance will act as a stimulus for the conditioned response of relaxation even if you cannot enter a meditative state in the moment. At the energetic level, incense acts like a smudging agent, removing stagnant and negative energies. Popular fragrances are sandalwood, rose, and jasmine, but stock your kit with whatever you find relaxing.

Water

Water is one of the most healing substances we have access to for grounding and clearing. Water can be utilized as a quick clearing technique in many ways. Showering, washing your hands, splashing your face, and washing your hair are all quick methods of clearing negative feelings and energies around your space. If you have access to a sauna or whirlpool, the combination of heat and water is particularly relaxing, especially when your stress doesn't respond to other means. Do you live near a clean body of water: stream, river, ocean, hot pool? Go! If it is too cold, just wade ankle deep and let the traumatic feelings empty into the pure water around your feet. It is amazing how many resources we have around us that we do not use when we need to. I recommend putting a reminder note in your kit about the closest cleansing water resource in your area. Tell your friends or family to take you there when you are overwhelmed.

Journaling

Write, write, write! Let your feelings flow out onto paper from the depths of your being. Do not intend to share this with anyone, so that you may feel perfectly free to express yourself however you need to. Poetry, letters, or diary entries are cathartic and provide you with a record of what you

were going through in your darkest hours. Sometimes we can let go of our difficult feelings when we know they are safely stored somewhere “for the record.” They can also be helpful if you are in counseling. When it is hard to speak the unspeakable, you can always bring in your writing.

Art

The same guidelines and benefits apply with art as with writing, except that art goes underneath words and is sometimes easier to express in dark times. Have an art kit ready and waiting with your favorite materials. One of the more helpful exercises for releasing traumatic stress by using art as a calming meditation is mandala design. On a blank piece of paper draw a circle. Your circle becomes your inner world on paper, with boundaries, yet without limits to express your true feelings as only you can.

Induced Emotional Release

This aid is the emotional version of syrup of ipecac found in many first-aid kits to induce vomiting and expel toxic substances. Sometimes we need a little help getting our feelings out. If you think about it, you probably have a piece of music, a book, a picture, or a movie guaranteed to bring on the tears. Holding in the terror, the pain, the grief, and the sadness is a form of suffering in and of itself. When you are ready, set a safe place and time to go into your feelings and release them with your aids. Sooner rather than later is best! I recommend setting a time limit for this catharsis to provide a safe container for your experience.

The Talking Cure

Freud famously proclaimed that talking was the cure for traumas, hysterias, and neuroses. Now we have the research to show how true

that is. For instance, we know that women secrete oxytocin, the relaxation hormone, even in nontraumatic discussion, when talking casually with friends. The brain continually organizes experience through verbalization. It is important to tell one's story many times until the experience is fully integrated and worked through. Some people have even made a career out of telling their tragic stories repeatedly. Find a friend, a beloved one, and/or a counselor to confide in. Make sure that person knows he or she doesn't have to "fix" you, just to be present and hear your story. Everyone I have met who has fully healed from trauma has had to process through talking for hours at some point. Now, if you are a sensitive person, you may be aware that telling your scary or overwhelming story might be scary or overwhelming to your listener, and you might not want to tell even your closest friends initially. If this is your case, hire someone professional—a licensed therapist or counselor—who is trained in this sort of listening and has support in place to handle hearing people's difficult stories. If you feel you cannot afford a counselor, there are many wonderful hotlines you can call to talk with people who are highly trained in crisis and stress management.

RESTORING

The third category of the first-aid kit is restoring or energizing. It is not a category that we Americans are good at! We always want to do something about our problems, which is fine, but sometimes we need to do nothing and allow the healing processes in the mind and body to do their work. After grounding and clearing, restorative practice is especially beneficial to allow the body to recover and integrate from stressful experiences. As mentioned in chapter 1, in days gone by someone who had what used to be known as a