Using Trauma to Make Desired Change

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**Can trauma be used for good purposes?**

Normally when we think of trauma we think of it as being a bad – usually a very bad – thing. But trauma can be about good things, not just bad ones: falling in love, getting married, having a baby, being promoted, receiving a large sum of unexpected money – these can all be traumatic and create significant stress.

My best definition of trauma is that it is a sudden leap to a set of choices that are significantly beyond what we had previously considered possible or real for us.

Usually trauma is about suddenly being faced with choices that our collective reality would consider to be significantly more intense or extreme. But trauma can also occur from sudden exposure to choices that are seen as less extreme – for example, a person born into wealth and privilege who unexpectedly loses money and status to face impoverishment and insignificance. Psychological trauma is measured in terms of our personal, individual, inner representation of reality, not by outer events instead.

Thus if I grow up in a war zone where important people in my life are always dying, the death of a sibling may be a huge loss but not be traumatic. Similarly if I expect terrible things to happen to me these aren’t psychologically traumatic when they do. Trauma is much more about what you DIDN’T expect, about what you thought wouldn’t or couldn’t happen to you.

**Beneficial trauma**

Trauma as seen in that light is clearly often beneficial. Sudden opportunities happen, we “step up” to these, and the result is often great benefits and positive changes in circumstances and/or life direction. What we thought was impossible or unreal for us suddenly becomes a real possibility, and we ”make the leap” to embrace it.

Such changes almost always lead to changes in our behaviors. Sometimes the changes are good, sometimes bad. Sometimes good changes come from good trauma, but bad changes can come as well. Likewise bad trauma can lead to good behavior changes.

But because trauma creates new choices and new power, it almost always results in some behavior changes, even of long-standing behavioral patterns.

**Inducing trauma**

So -- can we utilize this aspect of trauma to make desirable changes in our behavior or unconscious patterns?

Certainly. Many “carrot and stick” type motivators already do this. For example, one web-based system allows you do the following: you set aside $1000 which they hold. If you do not follow through with the change you intend to make the money is given to a cause you despise. How is this a trauma? You would never believe it possible for you to give $1000 to that cause.

Trauma doesn’t have to actually happen to be traumatic – it has to be possible/real to happen. Near-death experiences are traumatic. False diagnoses of cancer or HIV are traumatic. For something to be traumatic it has to be perceived as real by my inner reality – regardless of its reality in the outer world. The War of the Worlds radio broadcast of a fake alien invasion was highly traumatic to many people, but absolutely unreal. On the other hand, a mudslide in china that kills 1000 people is clearly traumatic, yet most of us do not experience it as such because it doesn’t affect our inner reality.

Similarly, if a terror group in a distant land commits an atrocity against another group there I may be revolted or appalled, but not traumatized. If the same group does the same thing but targets my home or friends – or any other part of what I use to define “me” – I may well find that traumatic.

So if we want to use trauma to help us make changes, the first order of business is to make sure that what we choose is traumatic for us personally.

So what kind of “trauma” are we talking about? Trauma of this sort might be a medically-monitored crash diet. It might be committing yourself to a public speech or to taking on a public or organizational role that is new to you.

Nothing inspires cleaning a house more than having people over who you want or need to impress. Peer pressure, public exposure, conforming to the norm – these all become powerful forces you can channel to help make the changes you want.

It will, of course, be traumatic! But that’s the point., because sometimes that’s the best choice.

**When is trauma a good choice?**

There are basically two types of situations in which using trauma to make a change may be a good choice.

The first is when you are really stuck in a set of behaviors and less intense options aren’t showing enough (or any) progress. If you can get what you want by paying a smaller price – or by paying in installments – then usually that’s the better way to go. But sometimes you’re asked for a higher price, or for the full payment up front. And other times you may have the full price available and just decide to pay it off right away and be done with it. At such times a trauma-based change may be very effective.

The other time to look at trauma is when the desired change needs to be made quickly or immediately. There is either no time for a gradual change or too much risk that a gradual change process will get derailed or be unable to be maintained long enough to reach the goal. Trauma creates fast changes. In these instances we have the person who goes “cold turkey” on an old behavior, or does a medical crash diet in order to be able to have a needed surgery. We also have people who are making sudden drastic changes to avoid a divorce or to retain a job.

**Possible problems with trauma-created change**

The greatest difficulty with using trauma-related change is that of ensuring that the change lasts. Trauma can force change, but we want the change to endure after the trauma has gone, or after we have adapted to it. We don’t want to live in a state of trauma all our lives.

So how do we take the trauma change and make it become the new normal for us?

**Making trauma-caused changes last**

When trauma disrupts our existing unconscious patterns our brains are temporarily befuddled. The unconscious is looking for a pattern it can follow. Immediately we may be running on heightened conscious control – hypervigilence – but eventually our consciousness is going to have to let go. When it does our unconscious thinking will be in charge and it needs to know what to do. Left on its own it will try to recreate the old pattern but weave the trauma into it – or run the old pattern and compartmentalize the trauma out of it. Either by adapting or isolating it will act to render the trauma less traumatic and disruptive.

This manifests as what in addiction is called tolerance – it takes more of the traumatic thing to get the same effect as the original trauma did with less.

Before the old pattern re-establishes itself there is a window of opportunity to substitute a new pattern. If you are in control of inducing the trauma, you have the great advantage over naturally occurring trauma of being able to be ready ahead of time for this opportunity, and for creating ahead of time the substitute pattern.

The unconscious needs some pattern to use, as soon as possible, and it isn’t too picky at this point about what the pattern is. There is a hole to patch, and the two big criteria are to patch it quickly and patch it completely.

**Risks**

The first risk here is not having a pattern ready to use for the patch. If you are inducing the trauma that rarely will be a problem. The more likely problem is that you may not have understood all of what the old pattern was accomplishing, so that your patch for the hole of it being gone leaves big gaps. If smoking wasn’t just about nicotine addiction but also about feeling like a grown-up and a way to socialize with others, those needs must also be addressed with the new “patch.” If the new pattern is grossly inadequate for patching the hole the old pattern left, the unconscious may reject it and make up its own based on other associational patterns it has. Ex-alcoholics abuse sugar now instead, or become workaholics. So again, be careful in analyzing the old behavior you want to change, and be ready to discover that it was about more than you initially realized.

**Process**

Beyond those considerations, the process for establishing the new pattern is that found in my article on Creating Sustainable Changes.

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