

Dharma and Mindfulness in Work with Highly Traumatized Clients

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Introduction

- Buddhism has always been about a way out of suffering, and therefore is highly relevant to trauma
- Severe trauma “turns up the volume” on suffering, for both client and therapist
- Although seemingly unlikely, trauma can lead to acceptance, growth, and wisdom for client and therapist

Sources of suffering

- Victimization
- Accidents
- Losses
- Social maltreatment
- But also
 - Challenges to attachments, and resistance to pain, per Buddhism
 - Yet, is it true? *“Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional?”*
 - Only if you have the option: Some things may transcend how one responds to them
 - Severe burns, extended child maltreatment, acute loss of loved one, rape, torture massive betrayal

***Sallatha Sutta*, the second arrow**

- 1st arrow is an adverse event (e.g., a trauma)
- 2nd arrow is our resistance or misinterpretation of the 1st arrow, leading to increased suffering
- Implication: It is not what happens to us, it is how we interpret it and resist it that creates trauma
 - The people who say such things are rarely in the midst of extreme trauma themselves (and the Buddha didn't say it)
 - Nevertheless,
 - We cannot change what happens to someone, that is in the past, but
 - We may be able to help with how they understand and process it (that is the now and the future)

The Pain Paradox

- Suppression, rejection, or avoidance of pain = increased suffering and decreases awareness
 - Literature on substance abuse, dissociation, thought suppression
 - Limits to processing, the downside of numbing
- Nonjudgmental acceptance of pain = decreased suffering and increases awareness
 - Direct experience of pain/distress allows it to be processed, decatastrophized, accepted, and gained from (posttraumatic growth)

Interventions

- Compassion and attunement trumps all
- Avoid statements about resistance and avoidance, but encourage acceptance
 - Acceptance can be very helpful: Stories from the burn unit and the torture treatment center
- When appropriate, and later, assist in finding the 2nd arrow
 - What hurts most about the trauma
 - What does the trauma mean to you?
 - About yourself
 - Who you are
 - What you have lost
 - About others
 - About the future
 - Are all these assumptions true (do not lecture)

Interventions

- *(Be very careful with this one; timing is everything):*
Besides all the pain and suffering, have you learned anything good or helpful from what happened, or gained any skills?
 - Balance support with exploration
 - The coffee and roses story
- Teach mindfulness or refer to a mindfulness teacher
 - Reduces reactivity
 - Increases acceptance
 - Increases metacognitive awareness
- Don't confuse attachments with attachments
 - Hanging on to things that are transient and not necessarily good versus
 - Embracing human relationships
 - The power of the therapeutic relationship

What about the therapist?

- The fine art of absorbing and remotely experiencing the suffering of those who have been badly hurt, without being traumatized yourself or burned out, while
 - Actively viewing this work as spiritually growthful
 - Maintaining a metacognitive perspective
 - Using the ReGAIN procedure
 - Knowing that expressed suffering also contains the roots of processing, acceptance, and growth
 - Knowing that being a therapist to those who suffer is *Bodhisattva training*, worth a hundred retreats
 - Be grateful for the chance to do what you always wanted, to care for others and to experience compassion -- not everyone gets to do it.

Suggested readings

Briere, J. (2012). Working with trauma: Mindfulness and compassion. In C.K. Germer & R.D. Siegel (Eds.), *Compassion and wisdom in psychotherapy* (pp. 265-279). New York: Guilford.

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