

# THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUALITY IN COPING WITH TRAUMA

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**“Spirituality isn't some quaint stepchild of an intelligent worldview, or the only option for those of us not smart enough to understand the facts of the real world. Spirituality reflects the most sophisticated mindset, and the most powerful force available for the transformation of human suffering.”**

**— Marianne Williamson**

## **Abstract**

*Life is a journey that begins with trauma and pain. Since time immemorial, trauma has played a constant, distressing role in the human experience. Whether by war, natural disasters, or man-made afflictions, trauma has been a reality that remains inescapable. Experienced as a result of neglect, abuse (sexual, emotional, physical), torture, criminal assaults, accidents, droughts, famine, death, or terminal illness, trauma has been and continues to be an inevitable part of life. Of the wide range of trauma causes, the most challenging, most enduring, and most complicated to overcome is the intentional harm caused by others. However, regardless of the originating cause, whether predictable or unexpected, trauma brings in its wake stress, suffering, pain, and too often death.*

**Keywords:** *Spirituality, trauma, mental health*

## **Introduction**

Despite the human capacity to adapt to its environment, trauma is more than a state of crisis, it is a response to any event that shatters one's conceived ideas of life; it is a normal response to abnormal events that overwhelm a person's ability to adapt to life (Wright, 2011). Trauma is a word whose origins come from the late 17th century Greek, meaning literally to “wound.” Every trauma case is different, and varies depending on a person's personality, life perspective, culture, socio-economic status, and spiritual or religious beliefs. According to Wright (2011) about 25%

of individuals exposed to traumatic events, are unable to cope with the effects of trauma, and will go on to develop the anxiety disorder known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Trauma can be defined as a psychological, emotional response to an event or an experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing. Because events are viewed subjectively, this broad trauma definition is more of a guideline. Everyone processes a traumatic event differently because we all face them through the lens of prior experiences in our lives.

The **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)** defines trauma as direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury; threat to one's physical integrity, witnessing an event that involves the above experience, learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death, or injury experienced by a family member or close associate. Memories associated with trauma are implicit, pre-verbal and cannot be recalled, but can be triggered by stimuli from the environment. The person's response to aversive details of traumatic event involve intense fear, helplessness or horror. In children it is manifested as disorganized or agitative behaviors.

Trauma can be caused by a wide variety of events. This is seen when institutions depended upon for survival violate, humiliate, betray, or cause major losses or separations instead of evoking aspects like positive self worth, safe boundaries and personal freedom. The **American Psychiatric Association** defined trauma in 1994 which states that, **a person must have experienced or witnessed an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury , or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and which involved fear, helplessness, or horror.** From the above mentioned definitions it is viewed that trauma results from a stressor that is overwhelming that no matter what the person's resources they will develop Stress. It also indicates that any traumatic experience makes individual feel vulnerable in some way.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) results from an often seriously life altering event(s) that is overwhelmingly stressful; it is a normal response, by normal people, to an abnormal situation. Events that cause PTSD, are usually unexpected and unpreventable, and are perceived as dangerous to oneself or others. PTSD affects the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual

realities of an individual, their families, friends, and ultimately society. PTSD deeply wounds the souls of men, women, and children. It damages relationships, creates confusion, fear, anxiety, and pain, often impairing one's ability to respond adequately to people, places, circumstances and events; in some cases it takes the lives of its victims.

## **EFFECTS OF TRAUMA ( PTSD )**

Effects of trauma (PTSD) are far-reaching. Symptoms can vary across multiple domains: physiological, neurological, cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social, psychological and spiritual (Foa, 2000). To understand the far-reaching effects, and the extent to which PTSD disrupts a life, imagine experiencing constant distress, and helplessness, with no hope of ever living a normal life again. According to Schiraldi (1947) symptoms may include: intrusive memories, fear, anxiety, guilt, self-condemnation, pain, feelings of vulnerability, suicidal tendencies, having difficulty concentrating, hyper vigilance , insomnia, uncontrolled anger, an over-sensitized nervous system, elevated heart rate and blood pressure, hyperventilation, headaches, nausea, hallucinations, substance abuse, restricted range of affect, emotional numbing, apathy, and feeling disconnected from those you love. Essentially PTSD shatters the soul, destroying innocence, and in its place constructs a loss of faith; in place of trust, PTSD constructs doubt; shame replaces self-esteem, and disillusionment replaces achievement. PTSD takes on a life of its own continuing to haunt and torment its victim, shattering their sense of safety, power, and control; upending their emotional, psychological, spiritual and personality processes. People with PTSD live with these symptoms constantly, struggling to cope with their fractured lives; they perceive the world as dangerous and view themselves to be incompetent against the relentless demons of PTSD. PTSD severely and completely compromises the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual integrity of those at risk.

## **THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUALITY IN COPING WITH TRAUMA**

The word "spirit" in English comes from the Latin word "spiritus" which means breath. Although we often think of spirituality as something special and apart from our ordinary daily life, it is really as close to us as our next breath.

A traumatic event can “take our breath away” and leave us feeling numb, distressed and disconnected. An important part of healing is to repair this sense of separateness within ourselves and from others.

All genuine spiritual practices, including humanistic ones, have some variation of the “golden rule”, to create for others the kind of world we would want for ourselves. This attitude may be extended not only to other people but all of life.

An individual’s resiliency and capacities to cope are important issues in the study of PTSD. Resiliency is the ability to quickly recover from difficulties; it explains the absence or mitigation of posttraumatic stress symptoms where such symptoms would normally be expected to appear (Racklin, 1998). Perhaps it is the capacity to find meaning in the seemingly meaningless that differentiates the victim from the victor, and the hopeless from the hopeful. Many studies indicate that people cope with traumatic stress in diverse ways, depending upon their religious or spiritual beliefs. After 9/11, and 26/ 11 a nationwide survey of stress reactions found that in 90% of individuals, the second most common coping strategy was prayer, religion, or spiritual practice; the foremost coping strategy (98% of individuals) was talking to someone (Schuster et al., 2001). While many victims of trauma seek religious or spiritual support from family, friends, professionals, or literature, others emphasize isolation, silence, and collapse intensifying the effects of victimization (Bonanno, 2004; Spouse, 1999). Of great significance is the fact that 90% of individuals who experience trauma are resilient, and do not develop PTSD (Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello & Koenig, 2007). Epidemiologic studies of PTSD suggest that more than half of the general population has experienced at least one traumatic event, and would satisfy the criteria for PTSD as found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV; APA, 1994). Yet, the majority does not develop PTSD, despite the fact that a considerable number of these individuals fall into the “high-risk” group (Racklin, 1998). However, this group only represents 10% of the estimated traumatized population (Brom, Kleber, & Hoffman, 1993). Those who exhibit resilience rather than pathology are frequently not included in the empirical studies and theoretical discussions. Nonetheless, despite the limited representation of trauma survivors, clinical, epidemiological investigation and neuroscience research still has much to contribute in gaining insights into the resiliency of trauma survivors – and more specifically the potential role of spirituality.

For millennia, the role of spirituality has been linked to prosocial development and identity formation (Fryling, 2012). Spirituality has prevailed throughout history as a type of social and cultural experience for people of all tribes, tongues, and nations. Spiritual and religious beliefs and practices have long been considered by the majority of general populations as foundational to mental and emotional well-being. Since 1993, the American Psychological Association (APA) has included spirituality as the psychological factor and considered spirituality as a positive factor, which impacts psychological and physical well-being (Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1995). Fryling (2012) examined the relationship between trauma and spirituality among adults, and found that trauma can in fact have a negative affect on spirituality depending on a person's pre-existing beliefs. While, some findings suggest that spiritual orientation fosters a greater sense of coherence, and mitigates the adverse effects of traumatic exposure. Racklin (1998) performed statistical analyses that identified a positive correlation between sense coherence and spiritual orientation. Findings indicated, "if distressed by traumatic symptoms, turning toward spirituality reduces traumatic distress by reinforcing sense of coherence levels". Racklin (1998) suggests that his analysis provides strong evidence for the inclusion of spirituality in prevention strategies and treatment interventions for PTSD. Obviously there is a relationship between spirituality and PTSD, as clearly indicated by the cited studies. Spiritual practices like meditation, Vipassana, Yoga and other spiritual practices play an important role in coping with trauma.

Jung (1933) stated that the recovery of the soul was essential for the individual. Jung maintained the importance of spirituality as a primary instinct, equal in significance to food or sex. A spiritually derived perception appears to be the underlying factor that provides a sense of meaning, coherence, and resilience, enhancing one's coping abilities in the face of trauma.

## **FINDING MEANING AND PURPOSE**

Spirituality is the foundation upon which the quest for meaning and the value of life rests, influencing perception and perspective. Jaffe (1985) and Lee (1988) have documented how a positive spiritual perspective can enhance trauma survivors' potential to use their traumatic experience to improve the depth, quality, and meaning of their lives. Trauma researches stress the importance of coherence, perception, and spirituality in fostering resilience. Resilience protects the individual in the face of trauma, and facilitates recovery if one is impaired.

Spirituality enables one to find meaning in trauma, and facilitates the will Your every breath is proof that you are already woven into the web of life.

## **CONCLUSION**

The prolonged disturbance of a traumatic event, and perceptual patterns of victimization, self-pity, and isolation intensify the negative emotions of a traumatic memory and exacerbate suffering (Peres et al., 2007). Whereas people who develop interpretative patterns of coping, and reframe the experience with a positive, realistic, spiritual perspective are resilient, have effective and efficient coping skills, and are able to prevail against the psychological trauma. This positive association and relationship between PTSD (the wounded soul) and elevated spiritual significance certainly is much more than just a means of integrating coping skills, improving attitudes and fostering a sense of belonging and support – it is the difference between a life of meaning and purpose and a life of living hell that too often ends in suicide. With the help of spiritual practices , people who go through traumatic experiences, can transform positively from their sufferings and can also become competent enough to overcome any troubled situations in life.

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