



PODCAST #15 – TRAUMA IS NOT JUST A DISTRESSING EVENT



by Carolyn Spring

Hi there! I'm Carolyn Spring and welcome to my podcast where I talk about all things trauma. I dig into the nuts and bolts of trauma, how we can recover, what blocks us, and all things neuroscience-y – what actually goes on in the body and brain during and after trauma, especially from the perspective of evolutionary neurobiology. This podcast is for anyone who's experienced trauma, or knows someone who has, which is pretty much everyone. For more podcasts, blogposts, books and training check out my website at carolynspring.com.

Welcome to this episode: 'Trauma is not just a distressing event.'

My job – what I spend my time doing – is writing and speaking and training on trauma and trauma recovery. That's a problem when I'm buying car insurance, because there's never a good fit on the dropdown list of occupations. But it's also a problem because it's often a conversation-

stopper when I introduce myself to anyone. If I just say to people, 'Oh, I help people to recover from trauma' then very often people think I'm a therapist, and that's the kind of stigma that everyone could do without (only joking!) But I also don't like saying it because I feel like it sets up what I feel is a disingenuous, dishonest kind of 'them and me' thing. You know – I'm okay, I'm fine, I'm sorted, but I help *those people over there* to recover – you know, *those people* who aren't sorted and who aren't like you and me.

And that of course isn't the case at all. I am a survivor of chronic and complex trauma. I work with trauma because I've been impacted by trauma. I've walked and am still walking a path of recovery from trauma. My aim is simply to shine a light on my footsteps, on where I've been – and point out some of the bogs I've fallen into, some of the missteps I've taken, so that other people can avoid them. And



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also the shortcuts I've found that helped me on my way – some quicker and safer routes up the mountain. I want to set up some ropes and bridges to make it easier for others. But I'm doing this as one mountaineer to another, not as someone who's written a textbook on mountains but has never climbed one.

I think when it comes to the trauma world, one of the most damaging things can be a sense of 'them and us'. We were traumatised very often in a power dynamic – powerful people ('them') rendering 'us' powerless. Power dynamics really don't help us to recover from power dynamics. They hold us in that sense of hierarchy, and superiority versus inferiority, and shame and the sense that we're not good enough and we're too damaged and we don't fit in.

And I really struggle with the whole concept of 'experts' who are in some way superior to everyone else. Working with trauma does involve a lot of knowledge and expertise (the more the better), but I think even more important than that, more fundamental, is compassion and humanity and hope; it's being an absolutely, fundamentally safe pair of hands with bags of integrity; and it's an unwavering belief in the worthiness and dignity of every human being. What qualification is there, how do you become an expert in that? In helping people heal from the trauma inflicted by human beings behaving inhumanly, our

humanity is all-important. Our ability to sit unflinchingly with someone in their distress and treat them with dignity and respect is far more important, to me, than the ability to write an essay on it.

And I have no interest in pretending to anyone that I'm just one of the sorted people over here helping the unsorted people over there – that's not how I view the world, it's not how I view people, and it's not a paradigm I'm at all comfortable with. Everyone is unsorted. Everyone is climbing a mountain. Everyone is falling in bogs. They're just different mountains, different parts of the mountain, and deeper or gunkier or more lethal bogs.

Therefore whenever I talk about what I do, I always try to throw in the qualifier that I do what I do because of what I've experienced – that I am a trauma survivor too. And obviously, in every conversation I have in life, I can't give a run-down, an explanation, of what I mean by that. I can't explain *what* trauma, *when*, how it affected me, where I'm at in terms of dealing with it. So I just have to put this big, vague word 'trauma' out there and hope (usually against all hope) that I'm more or less on the same page as the person I'm speaking to. But actually, of course, a lot of the time, I realise that no, we're not on the same page – we're not even in the same chapter. Whether we're in the same book is even sometimes up for debate.



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For example, I was once trying to explain to an older gentleman what I do. I said that my work involves writing and training to help people recover from trauma. I expected him to change the subject, but instead he seemed unexpectedly and unreasonably interested and even delighted in what I'd just said. He broke into this huge smile, his face went all soft and wrinkly with excitement, and he said, 'Oh really? That's wonderful! That's what my niece does!' So then it was my turn to smile broadly, and all the possibilities ran through my head about what exactly his niece did – was she a writer, was she a therapist, was she a psychiatrist, was she the CEO of a charity working in domestic violence? Did I, perhaps, even know her? So I said, 'Oh, really? What does she do exactly?'

And do you know what he said? He said, 'She works in insurance and she does all the claims and things when people have had car accidents. She's very good at it.' So I was like, 'Oh great, yes, very, very valuable work. How long has she been doing that for?' Of course what I wanted to say was, 'You what? What are you talking about? That's not what I do AT ALL! That's not what I mean by trauma!' (Although of course car crashes can involve trauma.) But it's certainly not what I mean by what I do to help survivors! So I just let it slide and let him effuse with evident pride about his super-clever niece who'd had two promotions in the space of a year ... and

I didn't ever explain to him more about what I do or why I do it.

So when I talk about 'trauma', I'm aware that it's not always what other people in society mean by 'trauma'. Part of the problem is that if I try to delineate it – if I talk about what happened to me both in childhood and adulthood, what *I'm* meaning by 'trauma' – then invariably the other person becomes quite quickly and quite deeply uncomfortable. It would be a serious case, I imagine, in their mind, of TMI – too much information. And I'd feel, as I have done on many occasions in the past, that I'm 'going on' about it, and that by doing so I'm demonstrating that I'm *not over it*.

And this, apparently, is the holy grail of acceptance in society. We can be tolerated as having experienced trauma, as long as we've *got over it*. As long as we've *put it behind us*. As long as we've *moved on*. As long as we're not *stuck in the past*. It's like the very first mention of trauma seems to trigger in people the need to know that we're over it. I've lost count of the number of times that people have followed up my brief explanation that I'm a survivor of trauma, with some kind of question along the lines of basically asking, 'But you're not bothered by it any more, are you? You're over it, right?'

And I used to very dutifully try to concur, and agree that yes, although I used to



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be very messed up by it, I've had lots of therapy now (a bit embarrassing, really, just how much ...) and I've been able to resolve it and no, *nothing of trauma affects me any more. You are safe with me. I don't even own an axe.* Because that's how it makes you feel – that people are assessing you to see how dangerous you are. Or at the very least, making sure that you're not going to dump your problems on them and expect them to fix them. Which of course is ironic, because the vast majority of us don't want to talk about what happened to us. And certainly not with someone who doesn't 'get it'.

A couple of years ago I was dating a guy for a little while – and that would make a podcast series in itself!! Things were going quite well (not least because he had a very big tractor) ... and I thought, for some reason, that I ought to 'fess up' before things went any deeper. Now even the language of that, the way I'm framing it, shows how much we often think of trauma as a dirty little secret – not that something bad happened to us, but that by it having happened, it has made us bad, and we need to beg forgiveness. So we met for lunch one day, in a lovely Scottish pine-clad, tiny, little cafe-cum-restaurant where literally the only soft drink available on the menu was Irn-Bru. And once he'd eaten – *obviously* I waited until after he'd eaten! – I broached the subject. I said I wanted to just fill him in a little bit

on some of my history, because it was important, I thought, for him to know.

But really, the way I was handling it, the way I was setting it all up, it was like I was about to admit to a string of armed robberies or that I'm Boris Johnson's lovechild. It was coming from a place of apology and embarrassment and shame. Anyway, I gave him the sparsest of headlines, just the top level stuff, and to be fair he was pretty good. He listened very attentively and didn't run away (I had made sure he'd paid the bill first, just in case he did). And then very graciously and very magnanimously at the end, when I'd finished, he said, 'Look, that's fine. I don't mind that that stuff's happened to you' (very forgiving of him!) – 'as long as' (here's the crunch!) – 'as long as you're over it. It's not going to affect you going forwards ... is it?'

There were many moments when a little red flag was waved for me over that relationship – many little red flags that in the end led to its rather rapid demise – and that was certainly one of the biggest. It made me realise that whenever we talk about trauma, the big preoccupation that so many people have is, 'Are you over it?' I think actually what they're saying is, 'Are you over it – so that it doesn't bother me? So that I don't have to deal with it?'

That's problematic at many levels, but I think it's based on a misunderstanding



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about what trauma fundamentally is. Because what if the very nature of trauma is that it's something that is actually very difficult to 'get over'? What if the very nature of trauma is such that neurobiologically we're not *supposed* to just 'get over it', at least not quickly?

I see trauma as the adaptations that our body and brain make in an attempt to stay alive in a dangerous world. And that's why it's difficult to 'get over' it. Because when we're faced with life-threat, if our body and brain didn't take it seriously then we wouldn't survive very long. If they didn't pull out all the stops to try to keep us safe, warning us with triggers and flashbacks, making us play it safe and small, getting us hypervigilant for danger, forcing us to assume the worst, getting us to jump to conclusions, making us wary of other people – if we didn't do all these things, all of which are the symptoms of trauma, then our brains and bodies wouldn't be doing a very good job of *adapting to danger in order to survive it*. In evolutionary terms, it's the ability to adapt that promotes survival. Darwin said that it's not the strongest that survives, but the one who is most able to adapt and adjust to a changing environment.

After trauma, we adapt to danger, and our bodies and brains *need* to make a big deal out of it. If they just whispered to us, 'Hey, you *might* want to watch out for that sabre-toothed tiger' but didn't

insist on it – if they just left it up to us to be able to *choose* to ignore the warning – then undoubtedly we would be eaten by said sabre-toothed tiger.

So trauma isn't something we're *supposed* to get over easily. It's *supposed* to impact us. It's *supposed* to change us. That's part of why it's so hard to shift. The problem isn't with *us*.

And that insight made me really realise why it is that when I talk about trauma, it's not often what society in general thinks of as trauma. My contention is that society thinks of trauma in terms of distressing, upsetting events – sometimes *deeply* distressing events – but that basically trauma equals a big, bad scary event that for some reason (either a character defect or a chemical imbalance in our brain) we haven't been able to deal with. The bigger, the badder, the scarier it is, the more 'traumatic' we say the event was.

And that's why it can be hard to grasp that our symptoms – what we often just bracket as 'mental illness' – are based in trauma. Because society has this scale of big, bad scary things that it counts as trauma, and if your experience isn't on the list, you assume it's not trauma. Basically it doesn't count unless it's things like terrorist attacks and war zones and violent rapes by strangers and kidnappings and car crashes involving blood and severed limbs. Only they



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really count as trauma, in the popular view of trauma.

And that sits comfortably with most people – such events are super big and bad and scary and that’s what trauma is. Or that’s at least what ‘allowable’ trauma is. We’ll understand when you can’t ‘get over’ things like that, at least for the first 6 months. But anything else – really you ought to be putting it behind you and moving on pronto. So we think of trauma as a hugely shocking, scary, emotional event. We think it’s all about how we *felt* about it. And we all know that ‘big boys don’t cry’ ... so if you’re upset by something and you’re not getting over it, you’re evidently either weak or mentally ill. Needless to say, that’s a harsh way of viewing people. But it’s also fundamentally misguided.

Or there’s the other end of the spectrum, where we use the word ‘trauma’ to refer to anything that’s even mildly distressing. Leeds United were thrashed 5-1 by Manchester United on the opening day of the season (I know because, to my great joy, I was there!) and that was ‘traumatic’ for the Leeds fans to watch. I’ll grant you that some of them were upset (I know, because I was there), but they definitely were not traumatised. Being upset does not equal trauma.

Neither was I traumatised when I was about 20 and I was on coach going

from London to Oxford and a car pulling a caravan just ahead of us on the motorway lost control. It snaked and wobbled for a few excruciatingly slow seconds over the carriageway and then hit another car in the outside lane. That car then jackknifed at seventy miles an hour across the road in front of us, swerved off at right angles and then literally flew up into the air and over the side of an embankment, like something out of *Starsky and Hutch*. We in the coach narrowly avoided it and pulled immediately onto the hard shoulder. Three of us – me, the bus driver and an off-duty doctor – got out, ran down the bank, and started to recover an elderly man and woman from some very mangled wreckage. I was distressed by that, I was upset by it – it was shocking, it was unexpected, it was horrible to see – but I wasn’t traumatised by it. (Partly, actually, because I was mobilised and able to act – I wasn’t powerless – but that’s for later.) I was upset, but not traumatised. Two different things.

So in popular parlance when we use the word ‘trauma’ we can end up meaning ‘*anything* that is upsetting’. And we cut people some slack for continuing to be ‘upset’ by it if it’s been a super-heavy-duty event. But fundamentally we view trauma therefore as an emotional thing. And that’s why we expect people to get over it – because sooner or later we all have to learn to deal with our emotions, don’t we? Whatever we’re upset by in



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life, sooner or later we have to calm down and move on – don't we? So why not trauma? Don't the same rules apply?

I would argue that no, with trauma, the same rules don't apply. Trauma is a qualitatively different kind of experience to a distressing event.

Now generally, in society, as I say we're quite understanding if someone's experienced a big traumatic event and they're really distressed by it *in its immediate aftermath*. We get that. You can't get over big things immediately. Of course you're going to be upset. Just been in a car crash on the M40? Take the afternoon off. But we do expect people to get over even big things *eventually*. A great saying that mostly we all believe is that time heals, so we adjust our equation to say that we need a little time to get over a little trauma, and a bigger amount of time to get over bigger trauma. It's a causal, linear relationship that we should be able to plot on a graph, right? Because time heals.

But here's the thing with trauma: trauma messes with time in multiple ways, and time *doesn't* heal trauma. Time heals distressing events (or if I want to get super-technical, time in REM sleep heals distressing events), but time doesn't heal trauma. Therefore you can be as impacted by it 5 hours later as you are 50 years later. Time on its own makes very little difference.

And anyway trauma isn't fundamentally about being upset by something. It may involve upset, even deep distress and intense emotion, but that's not what marks something out as traumatic or not. Trauma isn't just a very distressing event. It's qualitatively different, not just quantitatively different. Trauma involves life-threatening powerlessness and leads to a fundamental change in our neurobiology. There's an actual shift that goes on in our brain and our body – such a significant shift that it is literally visible in some cases on brain scans. It is, in that sense, a physical wounding right there in our brain whether we want it to or not, whether we're aware of it or not. And just like we can't control getting hungry when we haven't eaten, or getting hot when we've exercised, so we can't directly control the changes that trauma effects in our body and brain. You can no more simply flick a switch to 'get over trauma' than you can flick a switch to stop your hair growing. It's a natural, instinctive, unconscious phenomenon. We are literally powerless to control the impact on of us true trauma.

So trauma isn't just a big, bad, scary event that distresses us and which we haven't yet gotten over. Trauma literally – the origin of the word is even that it's a wound. If someone has shot you and a bullet has entered your arm, you can think about it however you like, you can reframe it, you can say 'This is no big deal' or 'It's in the past', but the reality



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remains that there's a bullet in your arm. And it's like that with trauma. How we think about trauma – *in the first instance* – doesn't change how it impacts us.

Now that doesn't mean to say that how we think about trauma in the long-run doesn't impact how we recover from it, because it does. But we have to get things in the right order. Trauma recovery is as much about sequencing as anything else – it's about approaching things in the right order. And in the first instance, recovery from trauma involves recognising exactly how powerless we are *to not be impacted* by it and how that impact is profound and primitive. And actually that that impact is *for our survival, for our benefit* rather than simply to mess up our lives and turn us crazy. The symptoms of trauma make perfect sense once we understand that our brain and body are adapting to try to stay alive. The symptoms of trauma are not the brain and body gone wrong – we're not either weak, cowardly, lazy or mentally ill. The symptoms of trauma are an attempt to survive and then predict and avoid further life threat.

You know, it's hard enough as survivors that we've had to experience trauma. It's totally unacceptable that we then receive such little support for having done so, and that we get blamed and shamed for not having recovered. Experiencing trauma is by its very nature a lonely, intensely isolating

experience. That's then exacerbated when society at large fundamentally misunderstands what trauma is, and so puts pressure on us to just 'move on' and 'put it behind us'.

I believe that we need to develop a much greater *respect* for trauma. I think in our modern, 21st century arrogance, we reckon that we're thinking machines first and bodies second: that we have bodies really just so that we can get around and go where we want to in order for our brains to have a good time. But one of my big passions is understanding the evolution of *homo sapiens* and how as a species – actually the only remaining members of the genus *homo* – we have evolved as hominins over the last two million years with big bodies and relatively tiny brains. The cognitive revolution, the sudden expansion of our ability to think with our front brains, only kicked in around 70,000 years ago which is the smallest sliver of time in evolutionary terms. So we have evolved largely with our back brains and bodies in charge, and it's been over those millions of years that we have learned and evolved to survive life threat.

Trauma isn't a 21st century phenomenon. Trauma – or rather the way we handle trauma – is in our genes. We need to have a lot more respect for the fact that there's an evolutionary, a developmental sequence, that we need to follow if we're going to recover from



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trauma, and that that doesn't start with our front brains. We can't think our way out of trauma. We can't just get over it and put it behind us by making some cognitive choices and developing some new cognitive frames. They are important facets to trauma recovery – as is talking about what happened, which is super important – but only if we do it in the right sequence, in the right order. Body first, emotions second, thinking third.

Distressing events don't involve a fundamental shift in our neurobiology, but true trauma does. Distressing events are like cuts and bruises – painful

in the moment, but in a week or two they'll heal. True trauma mangles us – it changes us, it rearranges things on the inside of us, and we are changed as people because of it.

So that's what we'll look at maybe in the next episode. For now, I hope that this episode has helped alleviate a tiny bit of the shame we can feel that we've been traumatised and that we're struggling to get over it. That's not a fault in our character or our brains. It's just the way it is for us as *homo sapiens*.

I hope that was helpful – speak soon.

