

Healing Trauma Through Mindfulness

by Blair Abbass

When my father returned home from World War II, where he fought in some of the worst battles, he was tormented by recurring nightmares. It was common to see him awake in the middle of the night, with gun in hand, searching around the house for Germans. He was admitted to hospital and underwent several days of examination. Sadly, Post-traumatic stress disorder was not a known condition at that time and therefore, he was told by the doctor that there was nothing wrong with him. As he was leaving the hospital, he was instructed to “Stop acting like a baby and go home and be proud of serving your county.” Abraham never fully recovered from the trauma and suffered through a long inner battle of substance abuse until alcoholism eventually claimed his life.

Thankfully, we’ve come a long way in the understanding and treatment of trauma and its affect on virtually every part of our lives. While not all traumatic life experiences are as extreme as the above story, it does seem, according to research, that the effects of trauma, no matter how great, influence generations to come if not addressed appropriately.

Many of us have experienced traumatic events, without a language to properly process it, which was certainly true in my life.

As a teacher in my forties, while undergoing voice therapy, my therapist became more and more frustrated with my inability to follow her instructions. She then stopped and exclaimed, “Blair you’re holding your breath!” After some reflection, I realized that I was indeed literally holding my breath, and hadn’t noticed it before. I spent some time pondering when this pattern had developed and a situation clearly arose from my memory.

At the age of 11, my father was out drinking and didn’t return all night, leaving me alone in the house overnight. I recall lying awake in bed, terrified, as I listened to the floorboards of the old house creak in the wind. I held my breath all night long, so I could better hear if someone was breaking into the house. From that day forward, holding my breath became my coping pattern in times of stress and uncertainty. As I grew older, this pattern created throat and digestive ailments, which required treatment. Thankfully, my voice therapist drew my attention to this unskillful way of managing the fear of a potentially traumatic situation.

Now when a stressful situation occurs, I use a multidisciplinary approach to turning off my fight or flight reaction and turn on my mindfulness and cognitive therapy training. Today, I can mindfully turn my self-awareness to the deepening of my breathing and recite the mantra “just breathe” while affirming to myself that I am safe.

Treating Trauma Through Mindfulness

Sometimes we’re not even aware that trauma from the past is colouring our present moment reality, until we learn about the detrimental effects of unresolved trauma.

Imagine how many of us, including our students, are similarly affected by traumatic events gone unacknowledged?

After 35 years of teaching mindfulness in the classroom and seeing the great success with my students and staff, I have recently launched a four tiered mindfulness program, *Mindfulness in the Classroom*, encompassing cognitive therapy, mindfulness practices, movement and story telling. These four components have proven to be a holistically successful approach in dealing with trauma, which, if left unattended to, can inhibit a person’s ability to enjoy present moment awareness. When there is buried pain, one cannot be fully present, no matter how much will and discipline you have.

Starting point

So the question we, as educators, can ask ourselves is where do we start with regards to healing trauma?

The most important thing is to create a safe place to open the conversation. We can let students know that it’s okay to talk about the trauma they’ve incurred. Secrets allow the trauma to remain stored in the body, manifesting physically as illness or mentally as low self-esteem, which can lead to substance abuse or self-injurious behavior.

It is also important to know that everyone has a different threshold for enduring traumatic events, with factors such as age, emotional maturity, quality of parental attachments and social support, determining a student’s ability to cope. What might completely unhinge one person might have minimal effect on another, so we must engage our students with compassion and non-judgment.

Including the Body

Bringing movement into the treatment protocol helps us to gently begin to thaw the painful memories that can become frozen in the body. Through easeful flowing movements and restoring the body’s natural breathing rhythm we can dissolve tension patterns and experience a new sense of freedom and deep relaxation.

One of our Yoga in Schools participants recently stated that she’s gone through years of talk therapy for past traumas, but wasn’t until starting yoga, where she included the body in the healing, that she began to experience true success in moving past her painful history.

Taking Action

The most common question we receive from the teachers we train is “How can I support students in skillfully dealing with traumatic events as they arise?”

With the onslaught of traumatic events around the world to which we are exposed in great detail by the media, our students can be deeply disturbed even if they’re not directly involved.

A great way to help students deal effectively with traumatic influences is to strongly encourage them to limit their exposure to repetitive newscasts that highlight global catastrophes, which are designed to maintain viewership. The next important step is mobilizing fear productively by taking positive action. The students could brainstorm how they might positively contribute to the victims of disaster, such as the many support groups that arose out of the Syrian refugee crisis. Taking positive action can transform feelings of helplessness into a sense of empowerment.

A few months ago I spoke with a woman who experienced trauma as a student in her teens. After skipping Grade 9 and jumping right into high school, she developed borderline personality disorder. Although she was intellectually bright, she was not at all emotionally mature enough to manage the transition. Knowing that her trauma caused the disorder, she chose to use the trauma as the impetus for something good, instead of staying frozen in her pain. She has formed a support group for people with personality disorders and uses yoga as one of her coping mechanisms for dealing with her ongoing challenges.

Everyone experiences their own storms at some point in their lives. By teaching our students to mindfully surf the waves of challenge by reaching out to share the burden, seek professional help if necessary and then taking positive action, we are helping to create more resilient, well-equipped individuals.

And if we’re willing to make lemonade out the lemons we are thrown in life, we might even be able to use the pain of the past as fuel for becoming the best version of ourselves.

Blair Abbass is an award-winning educator of 35 years. Founder of Yoga in Schools, Blair is the author of Mindfulness in the Classroom, which includes a segment on healing trauma through mindfulness. This new program was recently launched in the Mi’kmaq Kināmatnewey School Board in Nova Scotia.

For previous *The Well Teacher* articles,
go to www.nstu.ca

Click on ►► Communications ►► NSTU Publications
►► The Teacher ►► The Well Teacher

[From *The Teacher*, May 2015, Volume 54 Number 7, Page 14 © NSTU 2016]