

Foreword; Encyclopedia of Trauma 2012.

Ed Charles Figley; Sage

Trauma is the nemesis of our lives. Sometimes it swamps us, at other times it haunts us. It is the fracture that stops us running as we would wish. The word trauma comes from the Greek word meaning wound, penetration as in stabbing. Technically the penetration can range from minor to lethal, but it always leaves a scar and a vulnerability. In Traumatology, trauma refers to major upheavals and catastrophes that cause significant suffering.

Trauma needs to be distinguished from stress the way a strain on a bone needs to be distinguished from a fracture. Stress may be resolved and a previous equilibrium can be reestablished. In trauma, on the other hand, life enhancing balances and developments are irretrievably disturbed. Trauma is in the area between where attempts to restore life enhancing equilibria have failed, and death. It is the area of struggle, compromise, and creation of ways of finding new balances and healing. However, this must occur within a new narrative.

Since the dawn of self-awareness, humans have tried to understand trauma. The earliest literature, such as the epic of Gilgamesh and the Odyssey already deal with war, violence, rape, loss, guilt, and betrayal. Current literature and art as well as film and television still grapple with these issues.

The scientific understanding of trauma has centered in medicine, the science of suffering. Until recent times medicine dealt with physical trauma. Psychological trauma as a scientific and medical phenomenon has a relatively recent history. It coincides with the ever increasing numbers of traumatized soldiers who had to be recognised near the ends of ever more lethal wars in recent history, and the rise of psychiatry and psychology as healing disciplines. Thus arose medical/psychological terms like nostalgia (American Civil War), shell shock (World War One), combat fatigue (World War Two), and post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] (Vietnam War). Unlike after previous wars when trauma disappeared from medical diagnoses and public consciousness, this time the diagnosis of PTSD has remained robust during the last thirty years, and so has public awareness of trauma.

The last three decades has seen a consolidation of trauma data from war veterans, as well as other traumatic situations, such as physical assault, rape, torture, the Holocaust, natural disasters, bereavement, and childhood sexual abuse. Each of these areas had a history and knowledge base which has enriched and contributed to the recently evolved discipline of traumatology.

As happens in any new science, each platform of knowledge opens up further vistas to be explored. As trauma affects every aspect of human environment, striving, and achievement, there is a literal A-Z (e.g., agriculture and architecture to zen and zealotry) range of areas in which trauma needs to be acknowledged and studied.

Further, trauma is not just an event in a particular place. It is a three-pronged process that radiates through various dimensions. Let us take the original meaning of wounding. Whether through stabbing, assault of rape, there are physical, psychological, and social consequences. What physical, psychological and social symptoms and

illnesses result depends on many factors such as vulnerability and resilience, which adaptive and maladaptive survival responses were used in the traumatic situations, and how traumatic memories were stored in which parts of the brain and mind. Trauma also has dimensions of time and social space. It manifests differently in different phases of disasters, in different life phases of individuals, and in different social groupings - individuals, families, communities, and helpers.

Lastly, trauma has a spiritual dimension. The suffering it causes ranges from physical to existential pain. It can disrupt assumptions of morality, values, principles, identity, beliefs, ideals, religion, meaning, and purpose. Trauma attacks the soul. Much research and thought by many disciplines has gone into many of the features of trauma. However, till now their efforts have not been brought together in an easily accessible single work. This encyclopedia is designed to fill that gap.

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