

## VICTIMIZATION: DEALING WITH TRAUMA

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As a victim of a violent crime in which I came close to losing my life, I understand, on a more fundamental level than most practitioners, what goes on in the victim's mind. There is a piercing sensitivity, a hyperawareness to the environment that bears similarity to the hyper vigilance that often follows a traumatic event. Everyone around you becomes a potential threat with fear, especially aroused, by anyone that resembles the offender. The victim experiences what others have called a bad drug trip with one exception, the trip does not end with the coming down off of the drugs. Rather, it continues and the sensitivity borders on the paranoia.

In conjunction with this sensitivity and hyper alertness that victims experience, there is an intensive attempt to understand what has befallen the victim. Victor Frankl wrote about his own experiences in a concentration camp in his book: **Man's Search for Meaning**. Why did this happen to me is the recurring question the victim asks him or herself? In my own case, for example, I was staying with three friends of mine, who were brothers, in Mexico. One of the brothers actually provoked a fight. I did nothing to contribute to the fight but, unfortunately, I sustained the worst injuries of the four of us.

The immediate experience of being physically beaten was far removed from anything I had ever experienced. The helplessness was so terrifying that I actually had a dissociative episode in which my mind and body split from one another. I was so overwhelmed that my mind could only deal with the assault by freeing me from my body. As my torture was brief, I can only imagine the prolonged and perpetual horror that torture victims, such as those in the holocaust, faced at the hands of their captors. Subsequently, I physically experienced a sense of helplessness as I was taken to a hospital after having been beaten unconscious. There was little I could do for myself except follow the orders of the people I was with and, afterwards, submit to whatever the doctors and medical personnel had in store for me.

There is no feeling less empowering than that of helplessness. The mind plays strange tricks on those of us who have lived through the hell of near death events. Control is central here. But how does one gain control of what was terribly wrong and unexplainable? By **self-blame**. In looking for a meaning, victims like myself often combat the sense of helplessness by submitting to self-blame. Now, years later my thoughts at the time seem somewhat absurd, but at the time, they rushed through my brain like a river breaking through a dam. I asked myself why I did not stop one of the brothers from provoking the fight and, I took the blame for not doing so.

In my mind, I had the power to control the event and had not acted responsibly by stopping

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another's actions. In reality, I had no control over his actions. But the number of **should self-statements** that the victim makes to him or herself is automatic. Though, these statements are far from accurate they are attempts at dealing with an incident where meaning and fairness are missing. Likewise, because they believe they haven't done enough for victims who have died or who were hurt more than they were, survivors of an accident or a violent crime will often feel guilty. This phenomenon has been labeled "survivor guilt." Rosie Perez portrays this survivor guilt in the movie, **Fearless**, when she survives a plane crash but her infant child dies. Of course, in the past, law enforcement officials and even friends or relatives have often blamed rape victims for contributing to the act. These statements, often taken as accusations by the victim, are called **secondary wounding** and, they make the healing process more difficult inasmuch as they exacerbate the self-blaming tendencies of the victim. When people asked me what I did to provoke the beating I received, they were, in effect, adding salt to my wound. Moreover, during a period of time after my victimization, my increased sensitivity made their remarks that much the more hurtful.

### **The Two Types of Self-Blame**

I have discussed above how self-blame becomes an important ingredient in the healing process of a trauma survivor. I now want to make a distinction between two types of self-blame made by Ronnie-Janoff-Bulman: 1) Characterological and 2) Behavioral. Whoever suffers from a violent crime reacts to the situation with feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, perhaps the two worst feelings any human can experience. Yet being and feeling powerless or helpless in the face of great danger and, thereafter, is the very definition of trauma.

Because people prefer to think they are able to control their lives, it is easier to blame themselves for negative events rather than to acknowledge that sometimes life is unfair or arbitrary resulting in innocent people being victimized for no reason. When a catastrophic events befalls us, we humans, will almost automatically search for a purpose or intent. We shift the locus of control from the external to the internal as a means of feeling in control of the event. Thus, you may view yourself, rather than chance, as responsible for one or more aspects of the trauma. In this way self-blame can be a means of regaining the power that was lost during the traumatic event.

Janoff-Bulman's findings on rape victims and other victims, such as female incest victims who were able to make sense of their experience were less psychologically distressed and better socially adjusted than those who were unable to make sense of the event. Thus, if a rape victim or a victim of violent crime can understand that a behavior that he/she did may have contributed to the trauma, that person is more likely to recover from the trauma better than one who could not make any sense of the event.

The key, however, is that the victim does not see him/herself as the cause of the trauma, a person who has been referred to as a **characterological** self-blamer and who focuses on the past by attributing blame to his/her enduring personality. **Behavioral** self-blame, rather, focuses more on

the future and the way misfortunes, or trauma producing events, can be avoided. Rather than a character assassination, the victim that attributes his/her behavior such as leaving the apartment door opened or staying out late in dangerous areas, can understand how behavioral changes can reduce the likelihood of a recurrence of such a traumatic event. In the latter example, the individual is gaining a sense of behavioral control over his/her actions as a means of confronting and getting past the trauma experience.

Unfortunately, sometimes the complete randomness of the trauma inducing event may not give rise to a behavioral explanation of self-blame. In such cases, it is best to assist the individual in helping him/her deal with cognitive errors of attribution such as an intolerance of mistakes (i.e. perfectionism) or statements such as the world is no longer safe and there is no fairness in the world. Here, once again, it is important to shift any underlying characterological self-blame to more specific statements or cognitive errors that can be more readily changed.