

"I Wish She Wouldn't Go Back!"

Understanding Traumatic Socialization.

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The Hard Question

"Why it is so hard for trauma survivors to separate themselves from perpetrators?" "Why do they return to people known to hurt them?" These questions are on the minds of those who live around survivors, care about them, and often anguish for them on seeing the pain and suffering manifest in a survivor's daily life.

These questions illustrate the confusion held by supportive friends and relatives who observe survivors struggling to find a sense of belonging and family that matches what they observe in the media and society.

As an adult, the Core self of the survivor seeks out relationships that fit the social image. Providentially, some survivors find Significant Others (S.O.s) who see Core qualities and are drawn to the survivor for the person s/he really is. The relationship may even grow past a few of the "ups and downs" because the S.O.s think that the difficulties are just "normal" life events.

Eventually, the S.O.s realize that there are repeating patterns. If empathic, the S.O.s will continue to support, but feel occasions of frustration at the survivor having not learned from experience and being caught up again.

The Dawning Awareness

The S.O.s, having observed first hand the mental anguish of the survivor, feel helpless, angry, disappointed . . . etc. when a cycle begins again. S.O.s may have no personal experience from which to relate so they wonder if the survivor is naive, stupid, or masochistic. The answer is, "None of the above." These phenomena are the observable consequences of traumatic socialization and dissociation. Once S.O.s realize that, they become aware of the extent of incredible mental, physical, and spiritual pain that has shaped the survivor's life.

Then the questions come of "Who? What? Why?" At first, S.O.s begin ruling out anyone with whom the survivor maintains a relationship. It seems so logical that if someone hurt you, you would avoid him or her. That is the natural human response consistent with normative experiences.

As time progresses, S.O.s begin to notice that contact with certain individuals leaves the survivor agitated, depressed, dissociated, and not being themselves. As concern is voiced by S.O.s, the story emerges of how those individuals were the source of past and possibly

ongoing trauma. When questioned as to why they continue to stay in contact with someone who hurt(s) them, survivors will respond by minimizing the problem, by stating the person is misunderstood, by saying the person has changed, with a conviction that only the perpetrator will care, or any number of other reasons.

S.O.s who empathize with and try to support survivors can be non-traumatized people who do not know and may have difficulty conceiving the world that the survivor perceives. To understand the behaviors and feelings in this mind set, one must comprehend the belief systems that perpetrators impose on their victims.

The Trauma Mindset

A safe generalization is that perpetrators are of the same mindset no matter the social, financial, intellectual, political, or spiritual context in which abuse occurs. That mindset, which asserts the end justifies the means, utilizes dynamics of control, power, and possession. The perpetrator's end or purpose in the trauma context requires the victim to comply. Thus, a process of socialization is needed to groom or prepare the victim. Only through understanding the dynamics of socialization can one begin to comprehend the struggle of the survivor to break free.

First is the loss of autonomy of action and thought. - Trauma socialization begins early and steers the natural developmental dynamics of the child. While some perpetrators are intelligent enough to know specifically what to do to produce a specific outcome, others are reenacting the socialization dynamics perpetrated on them.

The desire for control is a foundational compulsion of the perpetrator. It may reflect the perpetrator's need to counter personal feelings of helplessness, fear, hurt, anger, shame, and/or guilt. When the victim responds with compliance, the goal is achieved. The victim becomes a mirror into which the perpetrator looks to see his/her personal power. The perpetrator is convinced they have total control. However, most survivors in reflection will say, *"But you can't (don't) give them everything."*

The following scenario is one example of the first shaping of the victim. An infant, who is completely dependent on his nurturer for sustenance, might not be fed, changed, or picked up until the perpetrator deemed the child would respond with utter compliance. As the child became mobile, the perpetrator restricts movement by even the most archaic means of restraint: clotheslines, pet carriers, locked closets, straitjackets, etc. With language development, the child only speaks within the perpetrator's guidelines. With emotional development, the child is not allowed to cry or be angry. The only accepted response, especially in public, is that the victim smiles, appearing to be happy. *(But you can't give them everything.)*

Second is the loss of autonomy of affiliation. - Perpetrators want to dominate victims, but they also want recognition from peers. When the victim has demonstrated compliance and knows to maintain a code of silence, the perpetrator will allow the victim to be

around selected others. Initially, the perpetrator will likely display the relationship to others who may themselves be perpetrators. When convinced the risk of exposure is minimal, the relationship is presented to the normative world.

Normative society assumes the observed compliance from victim to perpetrator is indicative of normal acceptance. The victim sees a congenial interaction between normative people and the perpetrator and assumes agreement. This innocent/ignorant societal response further sends a message to the victim that the perpetrator is accepted, right, and/or good so all society must be like the perpetrator. Society becomes guilty by association. This leaves the victim all the more hopeless, helpless, and alienated. The fixed idea that the victim assimilates is that no one will help them and that this is how life will be.

Since human beings are social by nature, the victim seeks relationships. Initially, the victim develops affiliation through empathy with and/or for the perpetrator. The empathic response from the victim further empowers the perpetrator and s/he may even assume that the empathy is a display of love. As the victim relates in the larger social context, s/he will likely be seeking out those who want to control. Out of empathy, some relationships may be formed with compliant individuals who may be fellow victims.

Sadly, since the two victims only know how to interact based on traumatic socialization, the relationship may become a replay of the past with one taking the role of perpetrator and the other that of the victim.

Third is the loss of autonomy of self. - As human beings, we have our unique Core identity. Core self strives for autonomy and self-expression. When Core identity is disallowed within the context of traumatic socialization, the resulting state for the victim is one of no longer feeling free to be who s/he truly is. *(But you can't give them everything.)*

In this third socialization dynamic, the victim will hear the perpetrator asserting ownership. This is done by use of pet names or direct statements that impart to the victim the message of belonging to the perpetrator. "My _____" (princess, sweetheart, etc.) becomes a fill-in-the-blank name for the victim and directly asserts ownership. This is not like the normative family context where similar terms of endearment are used. These names replace the use of the birth name and in so doing further depersonalize the victim.

This is the final step in which Core self loses preeminence in life. Rather, the victim is put into a role. The outcome is the dissociative creation of parts of self to fill the various roles or jobs, including to be owned by the perpetrator. Those parts hold the socialized beliefs that they belong to the perpetrator. At that juncture, the perpetrator appears to have total control over the victim. *(But you can't give them everything!)*

Now, let's explain the parenthetical phrase. *(But you can't give them everything!)* Human beings have a God-given ability to dissociate to preserve self and survive. In a traumatic event, Core self is preserved when s/he creates other parts to comply with the perpetrator.

The perpetrator mistakenly believes that compliance is total. However, in reality Core self is elsewhere in the mind, out of reach. Repeatedly, survivors have told of a sense of satisfaction knowing that the perpetrator did not have the believed degree of control. There was always a corner of the mind in which to hide, even from the most intrusive trauma.

If you don't understand dissociation, think of the Family Circle cartoon. The parent asks, "Who broke the lamp." The children reply, "Not me." And, running out of the room is an outlined figure labeled "Not Me". This is the simple illustration of a normative dissociation that a child does to avoid punishment or displeasure. Translating that to the trauma context means simply that a "Not Me" part complies so that the Core self can hold onto selfhood.

However, if a significant period of life was lived around the perpetrator, Core self stays in the background and defers to parts to live the life. When Core self accommodates to that lifestyle, the parts who were socialized in the trauma context are in charge, responding accordingly. As long as the perpetrator gets compliance to demands, the beliefs are known to be in place and the secrets are safe.

Only after Core self understands the "belonging to" lies, does breaking free occur. As Core self understands and communicates that reality to each part of self, the perpetrator's hold is broken. With that realization, Core self becomes free to be the person God intended. The parts may still feel the need to belong to someone. Core self needs to explain to the parts above all that they came from and belong to him/her.

The Struggle to Reclaim Self

Once these three beliefs are in place, they continue to be reinforced on into adulthood. The perpetrator lives with the concern that exposure is possible and that with exposure comes loss of power. The perpetrator becomes dependent on the victim to maintain the code of silence and protect him. If the victim is observed to naturally express any sense of self, the perpetrator recognizes that as a signal of loss of control. If unable to assert self, the victim is dependent on the perpetrator for definition of self. This mutual dependency is the basis for trauma bonding. The perpetrator needs to know that secrets are maintained. The victim needs to know s/he is not alone. Breaking the trauma bonds is necessary to reclaim ownership of self.

We know from research that even occasional reinforcement of what has been taught can sustain beliefs for long periods. An example is reinforcement experienced by a gambler or golfer. The person, almost ready to quit out of frustration, experiences one small success. The belief that luck/skill have returned is reinforced. The power of that reinforcement is enough to encourage the player to keep trying. Even if the player should return to losing, a single win made the player forget the frustration of losing. The player is once more in pursuit of the ideal.

Having the perpetrator express desire to see the victim evokes hope that maybe this time will be different. Even though another event of abuse occurs, the contact was enough to keep the victim in pursuit of the ideal. Thus, the traumatic socialization remains intact. Even infrequent adult contacts with perpetrators are sufficient to keep the victim coming back, maintaining silence, and unable to function from Core self. When S.O.s keep the impact of these reinforced beliefs in mind, there is understanding of why victims return to perpetrators.

Another reason survivors return to perpetrators is in the search for validation and esteem. In the recent words of one survivor:

"The perpetrator knows the survivor far better than anybody else in the world. This is particularly true if the perpetrator is a family member, and particularly true if the perpetrator uses extreme mind invasion and control.

If my perpetrator does not deem that I (the survivor) am worthy of love and respect, HOW can I expect those things from anybody else? I believed deep down that if anyone else ever got to know me truly well, they would react the same way as the perpetrator. Obviously, there must be a deep fault in me (the survivor), which at present, only the perpetrator(s) know(s). I further believed that if I (the survivor) could ever convince the perpetrator that I was worthy, then of course the rest of the world would obviously genuinely find worthiness in me."

For the survivor to stop yearning for validation from the perpetrator, s/he must learn that the perpetrator does not know how to give love, empathy, or esteem within that relationship. Some perpetrators are incapable in any context, only showing behavior normative enough to allow the perpetrator to pass socially. The trauma bond exists solely for the welfare and esteem of the perpetrator. Any validation given is self-serving and conditional. In contrast, normative relationships tend to see people as separate from self.

A person can be respected and valued, not as a possession or object, but for his/her unique personal qualities.

The Hope of Thriving

For S.O.s who are supporting survivors of lifelong trauma, you can help the survivor with gentle reminders that presently as an adult, no part of self belongs to the perpetrator anymore; s/he can care for self and have a social support system that believes and encourages without attempting to possess.

This will be a novel idea to the survivor and will need patient rehearsal until the whole self grasps that truth. You can further provide a reality check by discussing more about how normative society perceives things. Keep in mind that what you take for granted as how the normative world thinks, feels, and responds is very different from how the survivor perceives and experiences life.

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For survivors, this further emphasizes the need to build a healthy social network. If you are a survivor, don't give up. Look for people who aren't trying to possess you. Be careful to take time to get to know supportive people. They are out there. They will naturally be attracted to your Core self because they are seeing your core traits, gifts, or qualities objectively. These are manifest through your parts, because they come from the fabric of your Core.

If you test others or push them away, they will assume that they were wrong about you and will back away. Withdrawal on their part is based on observing your external behavior and believing your actions say you don't want a relationship of mutuality. What potential S.O.s observe can be the result of your parts interacting by the rules of traumatic socialization. Those parts need resocialization which only comes as the Core self learns how to live a life of thriving as an adult.

Core self needs to assert the desire for a healthy relationship to her internal system and reclaim ownership of all parts of self in the process. Remember your parts exist to serve the needs, wishes, wants, and desires of Core self. They will listen to Core self. The evidence of this fact exists in their ongoing search for friends. Your parts are doing that because they are aware of your desires. Therefore, your clear internal assertions are an important factor in building a social network and seeking healing for your whole self.