

I

Life Is Traumatic



A MOTHER WRINGS HER HANDS and breathes erratically. Her ten-year-old son is way late coming home from school.

In another household, a husband arrives home unusually early for supper. He goes to his favorite chair and slumps into it in despair. He has just lost his job.

Elsewhere, a seventeen-year-old throws herself in her mother's lap, confessing between sobs that she can't live without her boyfriend, who has just announced his family is moving to another state.

Throughout our lives, we continually face the possibility of painful experiences. Though some of us lead easier, less stressful lives than others, none of us escape difficult times entirely.

Our tendency is to resist these experiences when they come to us. We don't like difficult experiences, and we certainly don't welcome pain!

We naturally try to run from these challenges. Or, if they already have us in their grip, we fight them.

By resisting what we don't like, we actually compound our discomfort. By being at war with ourselves, we make ourselves anxious and our days stressful. Life gets *more* difficult, and we become even *more* tense.

If we find ourselves in too many difficult situations, we may begin to believe our life is going wrong—that we have somehow messed up. As stress and anxiety increasingly dominate our days, we pay a price. Our wellbeing is compromised. We suffer emotional and mental distress, which can escalate into anguish. Before long, this takes a toll—our energy plummets, and our physical health deteriorates.

However, it's *not the events* that cause the damage to our health. It's *how we respond* to them.

A REALLY DIFFERENT APPROACH

Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela are examples of individuals who survived incredible stress. Each of them suffered a great deal in their lives. Yet, they came through these anxiety-provoking, stressful times in such a way as to change the lives of millions of people.

I had often wondered what made such individuals different from most of us. Were they somehow unique, accessing a level of human potential that only a few on the planet are ever able to access?

As I thought about their lives, I realized that the way they dealt with their truly tough times was different from the way many of us handle such times. These people actually plunged into their most trying experiences, exploring the depths of what had befallen them, feeling the pain of their situation in its immensity, and *staying with* the difficult time they were going through instead of running from it.

Mahatma Gandhi experienced imprisonment and severe hardship, while at the same time being completely misunderstood even by people

who loved him. But by staying fully present in what he was experiencing, exploring the pain it brought him and going deeply into it with a great deal of soul searching, he came to realize that “non-violence” was the only answer to the crisis his nation was facing. The result was that India became a free country. How did this profound insight come out of such intense suffering? How did imprisonment produce a message that invited humans to rise to a new level of consciousness?

Martin Luther King Jr. also experienced a great deal of personal and social suffering. His followers wanted to riot and overthrow the government because it tolerated prejudice and discrimination. Like Gandhi, he too explored the painful experiences that presented themselves to him. He went *into* his suffering, searching his soul, and emerged with a realization that “civil disobedience” was the way forward. How did these two simple yet powerful words—words that were to change the consciousness of a nation—arise from such suffering?

When Mother Teresa witnessed the depths of human degradation as she walked the streets of Calcutta, she made a choice to live among the poorest of the poor. Why would she embrace such a difficult lifestyle? Of what benefit was this to her? What did she expect to receive from such sacrifice? As Mother Teresa immersed herself in the suffering surrounding her, she began to see humanity differently. Her life and her words challenged humanity to embrace a higher consciousness. As a result, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the highest honor that can be conferred upon a human being.

And then there is Nelson Mandela, a man who was imprisoned twenty-seven years for speaking out against apartheid. He simply had wanted to be seen as a human being. After all those years in prison, he could have come out bitter, angry, and even more in conflict with the government of his nation than when he was first incarcerated. After all, the greatest part of his life had been taken away from him against his will. Yet when he was released, he proclaimed a message of “reconciliation.” He wanted to bring the abused and the abuser together. It was by

learning to see through the eyes of an incredibly difficult experience that such a vision was born, enabling the suffering so many of the people of South Africa had endured to have redeeming benefit for humanity.

Each of these great people of our time, whose lives we will revisit in a later chapter, challenged us to become more ethical, more moral, more loving, and ultimately more human. They demonstrated that by going into our toughest times, and emerging transformed on the other side, we receive an amazing gift of new vision.

In the end, the only difference I could detect between these outstanding individuals and the majority of us is that most of us often tend to run from difficult times, push them away, or pretend they aren't happening. We want to avoid pain and suffering at all cost. But I have become convinced that, in our avoidance, denial, and fear, we push away the very experiences that seek to stimulate the evolution of our consciousness. In fact, we deny ourselves the opportunity to become the person we yearn to be and are ultimately destined to become.

ALIGN YOURSELF WITH WHAT IS

When we do battle with what's happening in our lives, we inflict suffering on ourselves and on those around us. We damage ourselves and we damage our relationships.

This book proposes that resistance to *any* aspect of our lives is counterproductive. Fighting what's happening to us leads only to increased suffering. Realizing this fact invites a different approach.

How can we cope with stressful times in a way that doesn't leave us reeling, doesn't turn life into a battlefield, and doesn't damage our health?

Since we cannot prevent such times, the wise response is simply to *allow* them to be as they are.

Because humans are a living organism on this planet, like other species we are designed to *experience, endure, and survive* stressful episodes. Not only can we survive these experiences, we can also learn from them and

adapt. In fact, if humans didn't possess the ability to learn from stressful experiences and adapt, our species would have become extinct. The fact we are still here suggests we have learned from the stress endured by our ancestors and adapted well.

The reality is, there will never be a time when our life is free of situations that trigger stress and provoke anxiety. Once we accept this, we experience a shift within ourselves. We then realize that nothing is going wrong during these times. In fact, we can learn how to use our experiences for our benefit.

WHEN LIFE TURNS UP THE HEAT

Stress and anxiety are not the same, although they are close companions and often trigger each other.

Stress comes from the feeling that a certain set of circumstances *should not be happening*.

When we believe something in our life shouldn't be the way it is, we go into a mindset of resistance. We mentally oppose what's happening. This is the feeling we identify as *stress*. Something has come up, and we want to get it over with, get past it, get it out of the way. In other words, *we are in flight from the way our life is right now*.

Anxiety stems from the feeling that something *should* be happening that clearly isn't.

When we believe something ought to be happening, we yearn for it, ache for it, often to the point that our longing eclipses our ability to enjoy what's presently happening in our lives. Longing for something that isn't happening causes us to be dissatisfied with our life as it is right now. The effect upon our mental wellbeing and our health is the same as that of stress.

In both stress and anxiety, our inner experience is that we want to be somewhere other than where we are. We're not happy, not fulfilled with our life as it is at this moment. So, though we are forced to endure the

situation because we can't find a way out, we wish we could flee from it. We are here, but our mind is elsewhere, which constitutes a splitting of our whole self.

Usually we get over such times. When something we perceive to be good happens, we forget what it is that "shouldn't be happening" or "ought to be happening."

The problem with merely "getting past" a stressful or anxious time is that, although life appears to move on, nothing has actually changed. We may have left a particularly difficult situation behind, but *we* remain *the same*. In fact, we have simply reinforced our weakness in the face of stress or anxiety, leaving us even more vulnerable to the next source of distress that comes along. Because it was too overwhelming and we didn't have the skills, we couldn't allow the stressful event to have the transformative effect it could have, and consequently we are as vulnerable as ever to subsequent difficult times. Just how such times can become a gift, transforming us, is the subject of a later chapter.

Initially we may not be able to do anything but run away from life's stress and anxiety because it is too difficult to face. But in due course the universe will invite us to continue exploring our stress until we can deal with it. It seems to have a way of turning up the heat that's just right for us. A new situation comes along, this time predictably of greater severity. As stress and anxiety occur with increasing severity, we eventually find ourselves in great distress. Because the situation stresses our nervous system beyond its usual coping ability, we experience a more serious response whose effects don't leave us so easily.

TRAUMA IS INDIVIDUAL IN NATURE

In addition to stress and anxiety, many of us experience *trauma*. It's not always easy to spot when an individual is in trauma. This is because an episode that may overwhelm one person may not be experienced as overwhelming by another.

Whether an experience proves to be traumatic for a particular individual depends on such factors as the person's age—think of how much more vulnerable a small child is, or an elderly person—the severity of the threat, the degree of physical harm that may be inflicted, the possibility of escape, how accustomed to coping with difficulties the individual is, and the cumulative effect of previous trauma.

For instance, due to the individual's life history, one soldier could experience a battle as traumatizing, while another might experience it as only mildly disturbing. One person in a car accident may be frightened of driving for years afterwards, while another person in the same car recovers from this fear in a few weeks.

Feeling traumatized should never be judged as a weakness in an individual. This is because our reaction to potentially traumatizing situations is instinctual and therefore not under our conscious control. We don't make a conscious decision to feel traumatized—it's an *automatic* response.

In fact, we shall see that *a traumatic reaction is a positive response, not negative*. It's not a display of weakness, but rather the body's attempt to protect itself. The basic emergency alert system of the human organism is activated during these times to promote survival.

Trauma can be experienced physically, mentally, and emotionally. Whether it affects our body, our mind, or our emotions—or all of these simultaneously—it's part and parcel of the human experience. It's impossible to go through life without experiencing some degree of trauma.

Though trauma is an unavoidable aspect of life—the result of the body's courageous defense of itself—it's nonetheless an intense experience and something we would rather avoid because it sends us into shock. Yet, it's an integral aspect of our human experience and our evolutionary journey. No matter how much we try to protect ourselves from traumatic experiences, we can't prevent them from happening.

A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

Since it's not widely recognized that trauma serves a purpose in our lives, it's essential that we change the way we view traumatic experiences.

Trauma is common to the human species. Consider the fact that life begins traumatically. We come into the world through the painful process of birth—an experience in which we are squeezed out of shape, pushed, and sometimes even pulled with hard, metallic instruments. It's not a pleasant welcoming at all.

Bursting into the light for the first time in our existence, our entry into the world is a shock to the human organism. A room filled with cold air, bright lights, and the noise of other human beings is a drastic change from the dark, soothing warmth we have become accustomed to in the womb. Making our debut in such a hostile atmosphere, it's no wonder we begin life by bellowing our lungs out.

As infants lying in our crib, we are assaulted by hunger pains, colic, skin rashes, and a host of discomforts we don't understand and don't know how to respond to other than by crying helplessly and vociferously.

In due course we discover the ability to move about. For a time we are unstable in our movements, which means inevitable collisions and crashes into unyielding objects. The shock of toppling over time after time as we attempt to walk is in itself stressful.

As we struggle to find our feet, we are guaranteed that life will be punctuated with bumps on the head, cuts, and grazes—all of which are accompanied by tears, either from the physical pain we incur or from a bruised ego.

LEARNING TO “SUCK IT UP”

The journey toward independence isn't only physically traumatic, it's also emotionally traumatic. In fact, our culture presents us with considerable psycho-emotional trauma—the kind of trauma caused primarily

by social conditioning. Situations that threaten our social self such as rejection, shame, fear of failure, and negative judgment by others cause us to react in the same manner as if we were being threatened physically. The body takes up a position of submission and withdrawal, slumping forward with the head down—the precise posture it assumes when threatened by physical trauma.

When we are very young, trauma often accompanies even the most enjoyable of experiences. For instance, once we begin to play among other children, there's always someone who wants the toy we are playing with. Pretty soon our fun turns to tears, tantrums, and trauma as we are dragged away from the sandpit or our friend's yard by a caregiver, then threatened, yelled at, and perhaps even physically assaulted with a spanking.

Then there is the emotional trauma of entering daycare or kindergarten. Until now secure with a parent or caregiver at home, we are suddenly left for the day among strangers—an experience that finds many of us distraught and wailing, “Mommy, Daddy, don't leave me!”

When we begin school, we are likely to encounter bullying, which has emerged as a scourge of the school playing field—and of the school bus. Few of us make it through our educational years without being bullied. Repeated bullying can be extremely traumatizing for a child.

A case in point. When an African American girl turned eleven, her parents decided to send her across town to a junior high school in a culturally different neighborhood. Her experience up to that point had mostly involved middle class African American and Japanese American families. So when she was put on a bus to attend a school in an all-white, affluent neighborhood, she wasn't prepared for the culture clash she was about to experience.

Her first traumatic experience came when, because her stop was one of the last stops of an already overcrowded school bus, no one wanted her to sit next to them. Since she was perceived as “shy and nerdy,” they didn't care to scoot over and allow her to share their seat. Each day, the

bus driver ordered one of the students to move over, and even then the young girl found herself with only three inches of seat.

Every day, for fifteen miles, she balanced herself on the edge of the seat so she wouldn't fall into the aisle. Next to her sat a resentful student who had yielded almost no space, but who enjoyed taking advantage of the African American student because she was meek, mild, and non-confrontational.

Unfortunately, kids can be cruel to each other at certain times in their lives. For the one who is being shunned, it's a stressful, anxiety-ridden, traumatic experience. Most days, this young girl cried silently all the way to school.

At school, the culture clash didn't turn out to be as bad as the girl had imagined. She found she had much in common with one of the local girls, and they became friends. But this exposed the local girl to her own traumatic experiences. The kids in her own neighborhood began whispering and laughing as she walked by. Soon they were taunting her, telling her she was a traitor, calling her hateful names that stabbed her heart.

Being a teenager is all about trying to fit in and finding your niche. But when your niche is outside of the box, ostracism is the price—as countless school children experience each and every day.

It's stressful growing up in our schools. Many of our kids exist in a state of high anxiety. All they can do is “suck it up.”

Quite apart from threats by other people, just growing up has its growing pains. For instance, we may love to play a sport. But even when we are having fun, our excitement is frequently curtailed by the consequences of the rough and tumble, from which painful bruises, twisted ankles, and even broken bones result.

The teen years are also marked by our entry into puberty with its stressful rites of passage—painful periods, pimples that embarrass, and the inevitable broken heart.

So far we've talked about normal children leading ordinary everyday lives. But another, more sinister face of being a child is found in the maltreatment many youngsters experience—a topic we will investigate in a chapter devoted to post-traumatic stress disorder.

STRESS AND FAMILY LIFE

As adults, we face new stresses and different sources of anxiety. On the job, we run up against a boss who makes our life difficult. A coworker betrays us. Or the company out-sources, then downsizes, and we are let go.

At home we may start a family. Now we experience the trauma of growing up from a different vantage—through our children. As parents, we want to protect our children from pain, but we find we can't.

Juggling career and family—a reality for so many today—can be especially anxiety-provoking. As one mother recalls, “Once my first child was born, all of my beliefs and expectations of what I wanted to achieve in this life evaporated. In my heart and mind, ever since I was a little girl, I had carried a dream of being the first woman CEO of a major corporation, and suddenly my dream was gone. I didn't care about anything but my baby. I wanted to nurse him, read to him, hold him, kiss him—all day long.”

Our deepest desires often clash with harsh reality, as this mother discovered. The world of commerce presents many challenges. In the work environment, not only are we deprived of being with our children, we often find ourselves dealing with individuals who play mental games with us. People can make the workplace a place of misery—and do so each day for millions.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health reports that 40% of workers find their job to be stressful, and in many cases extremely stressful. A full quarter of the labor force identify their job as

the primary source of stress in their life. Almost as many have shed tears over workplace stress. Some 19% have quit a job and 29% have yelled at fellow workers because of stress. In fact, 42% admit that yelling and verbal abuse are commonplace in their work environment. It's no wonder the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* reports that health care expenditures are almost 50% greater for workers who experience high levels of stress.

Though no one is immune to trauma, once we recognize that a traumatic experience can serve a valuable purpose in our lives—and that we do not have to live in perpetual trauma after its work is done—we no longer create for ourselves the added suffering that comes from resistance to trauma.

By accepting trauma as an inevitable part of being human, we allow it to have its transformative effect on us.