

September 11th, Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and EMDR, a Specialized Recovering Technique

We all try to build emotional fences around ourselves to feel some measure of safety in what is, in reality, an unpredictable and often dangerous world-as many of us have experienced due to personal trauma and all Americans, especially New Yorkers have experienced due to the devastating attacks on our country, especially The Twin Towers at The World Trade Center- September 11, 2001.

A New York Times article, May 2, 2002, discussed a study of New York City school children, fourth grade to twelfth grade, done some months after September 11th. The study found that most children had some symptoms of post traumatic stress, and about 10% had full blown Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. They all had fear of being in public places or on public transportation (agoraphobia), insomnia, nightmares, obsessive thinking about the attack, or, conversely, trying not to think of it. An equal percentage of adults, about 10%, also experienced the full blown force of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, ranging from survivors, families of those who lost loved ones, people who witnessed the attack directly, to fire fighters, police officers, volunteers at "GROUND ZERO", and New Yorkers as well as American citizens throughout this country and the world.

Just exactly what is Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome? First, it can be caused by natural disasters, raw experiences, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, as well as tortures, resulting in overwhelming fear for life, fear of severe bodily injury or actual injury, or severe psychic wounds to one's sense of self. Human deliberate cruelty seems to elicit the strongest sense of trauma.

The major symptoms consist of flashbacks, recurrent, deeply upsetting memories to the point of actually reliving them as if they were living them in the present; sleep disturbances, including insomnia, recurring nightmares, and frequent waking; severe reactions to situations at all similar to the original trauma; hyper alertness for possible danger with exaggerated startled reactions, psychic numbing –feeling as if one is not one's body or a lack of emotions, agoraphobia, memory lapses in regard to the trauma, detachment from other people and constricted emotions, even with loved ones; anxiety and depression resulting in lack of interest in usual activities and actual limiting of activities as well as a profound fear of the future.

Other symptoms include irritability, even angry outbursts and concentration problems. In full blown Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, there is sufficient distress to limit many or all important areas of functioning – social, occupational, and personal.

The New York Times reported in March that the use of psychiatric medication has gone up over 20% since September 11th. Medication can be very helpful in the short run for Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. However, medication-anti-depressants and anti-anxiety can have side effects and can result in long-term use and great difficulty in reducing or eliminating them.

Fortunately, there is a relatively new method of treatment for helping people with trauma and its symptoms. It was discovered by Dr. Francine Shapiro, a psychology student in the 1980's, who discovered that bi-lateral stimulation of the brain, along with a protocol for dealing with disturbing issues and memories, could significantly reduce, even eliminate, trauma when practice by a highly experienced psychotherapist with specialized training in the EMDR procedure.

What does EMDR mean? It is called eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. For reasons which we still do not understand, most studies are on going, the combination of the protocol of the trauma along with bi-lateral stimulation (bi-laterally) tends to reduce emotional and bodily disturbance. EMDR is especially helpful for post traumatic stress, as well as most other emotional problems. It was used following the Oklahoma bombing and proved more effective than "debriefing" or regular "talk therapy".

Many of those who have experienced EMDR, including clients I have worked with including trauma in relation to September 11th find themselves free from past and present trauma. All therapists who have been trained in and use EMDR are happy to have such a powerful method to help traumatized clients. Such clients find themselves freed from past and present traumas, able to go on to lead their lives more fully with greater piece of mind and joy in life. It is truly a revolutionary technique for those for whom the regular methods of treatment have been unhelpful.