

## Escaping the trauma vortex

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"Focusing our awareness on our bodies is the basic tool of Somatic Experiencing," explains Gina Ross in front of a captivated audience packed into the bomb-proofed Sderot Resiliency Center, a little over a kilometer from the Gaza border in southern Israel. It is 8 a.m. on a Friday morning, and most Israelis are sleeping in on the first day of the weekend. But here, 60 social workers, educational therapists, psychologists and doctors serving the western Negev area have flocked to learn an innovative trauma treatment called Somatic Experiencing.

In retrospect, this course could not have been better timed. With the severe escalation in Gaza at the time this article went to print, and the fate of those towns situated near the Gaza border so uncertain, each inhabitant feels their fragility more than ever. The SE courses organized by JOINT for mental health professionals also targeted the general public in order to teach them emotional resiliency in times of trauma.

Ross is fully aware of her sensitive audience, all of whom have daily contact with traumatized patients living around Sderot, but she is upbeat: "SE and Emotional First Aid for everyone can be overwhelming in its success rate - sometimes in just a couple of sessions, the 'trauma vortex' is replaced by the 'healing vortex,' and symptoms held for many years are gone!" she exclaims. The "trauma and healing vortex" metaphors express the basic theory of Somatic Experience (SE). Ross uses the terms, coined by Peter Levine in his book *Taming the Tiger*, in her many books too and even extends this to the collective level.

SE theory propounds that "trauma" is an uncompleted biological response to threat, which leaves the system in an excessively high level of arousal, with thwarted movements of defense frozen in time. Faced with an impending threat, the human body prepares to either flee or fight. Muscles tense in anticipation. However, if people are unable to complete the appropriate actions and then unable to discharge the tremendous energy generated by their survival responses, the energy becomes "stuck" - first in a state of acute, then chronic, arousal. The dysfunction then "sets" in the central nervous system. Traumatized people are not suffering from a disease; instead, they are stuck in a perpetually aroused state. Learning how to thaw the freeze and release the sensory motor expressions of trauma-based emotions is an essential aspect of SE treatment.

In sessions, the clients focus on sensations in their body and are encouraged to become aware of the constrictions or relaxations present. Noticing these sensations usually brings a favorable shift and a discharge of tension. Body awareness is a powerful way of moving the client away from the trauma vortex into a more favorable healing vortex. "This method is gentle and works little by little to discharge painful memories and sensations. The emphasis is on not overwhelming the client," agrees Anita Goode, a clinical psychologist who has recently taken Ross's courses and is impressed with the powerful results she already sees in her clients.

Ross, a trauma expert and founder and chair of the International Trauma-Healing Institute in the United States and the International Institute for Trauma Healing in Israel, is also the Middle East senior trainer for Levine's Foundation for Human Enrichment. Born in Syria, Ross's childhood was eventful. "My family left Syria overnight, after the UN resolution for the partition of Palestine into two. We were the last plane allowed to leave. Then, 10 years later, overnight again, we ran from Lebanon after the bombing of the high government building next to our house. We were refugees twice overnight and never went back. But somehow, my parents made sure that we adapted to the countries that hosted us. I know all about trauma, but I also know how to overcome the insecurity and difficulties of exile."

She made aliya in 1971, studied Hebrew at ulpan, met her husband, and left the country. For the past decade, she has been coming to Israel five times a year from her home in Los Angeles, teaching classes in fluent Hebrew (one of the seven languages in which she is fluent, including Arabic). Ross has made it her mission to heal trauma victims both in Israel and in the Palestinian territories, and to develop resiliency at a national level. She has given workshops in Ramallah as well as all over Israel. "I am a Jew who comes from an Arab culture, and I think this gives me a unique point of view," she observes. Ross feels passionately about Israel; she also believes that, although Israelis are particularly resilient, they still suffer from collective trauma, and turn their anger against each other. She believes that the Palestinian collective trauma "vortex" has been spiraling out of control for a while, and that the Israeli-Arab vortex has potential to escalate too, if that population's trauma is not addressed.

"Like in all things, there is polarity in trauma; for every trauma vortex, there is a healing vortex that emerges. We must

teach everyone in all three populations how to engage their healing vortex, heal themselves and build resilience. Peace can only come from balanced collective nervous systems. This is where creative solutions to daunting problems come from," she declares.

According to SE, it is easier to bypass the cognitive part of the brain and work directly in the language of the more instinctual amygdala and brain stem. "We speak the language of the primitive brain, the language of sensations inside the body, which holds all implicit, unconscious traumatic memories, in order to access and discharge traumatic symptoms more directly, through the body. [This will] then communicate back to our thoughts and feelings, helping them change their negative aspects," Ross explains.

All the participants in SE training deal with trauma on an ongoing basis, and most talked about the Kassam rockets as part of their daily life. "The fear and anxiety are obvious," admits child psychologist Tal Zacharen, who works in Sderot schools. Childrens' symptoms include bedwetting, sleeplessness, inability to concentrate and learn, problems forming attachments and separation anxiety, depression and crying. Adults report despair, depression, sleep and appetite disorders, and lack of motivation, anger and general numbness.

Ohad Drory, a social worker with the Jewish Agency in the Sderot area, says he often has to be the first one at the scene after the Kassam attacks that scare and hurt so many families: "I have to deal with the mess it has caused to families. PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] is rife and the sound alone of the Kassams spinning through the air often is enough to set severe anxieties off again. Sadly, a lot of pills are doled out to soothe nerves here - but maybe, now, SE will be able to help us."

Moti Cohen, head of mental health services for the Israel Police, who is about to retire, has spent over 27 years dealing with stress and trauma. "When I started in the police, there was nothing built into the structure to deal with the daily trauma the police force confronted. Since the beginning of the Intifada and multiple suicide bombings that started in 2001, we have had to address the trauma of police personnel who witness horrific sights on a daily basis."

With the tensions mounting every minute around Gaza, all inhabitants there need to be vigilant about their own emotional and mental well-being over the coming weeks. "The SE Emotional First Aid courses for the general public are crucial for all to learn how to self-regulate," explains Ellie Render, a SE practitioner who targets secondary trauma in the general public. "Next week I hope to run an emotional first-aid workshop for the general public in Jerusalem. Even though many are not directly affected by the traumatic events, secondary trauma - whereby we vicariously live the trauma - can be powerful destructive elements. We need to teach tools to calm and heal."

Thirty assistants volunteered to assist Ross with the three-day training course. Most have completed all nine courses needed to become certified SE therapists, besides their regular psychotherapy training. Ross seems to garner support wherever she goes. "This type of staff-to-student ratio is crucial for maximum learning - we owe it to the Israelis' wonderful generosity and the capacity of SE to inspire giving and healing," she enthuses. The participants in the Sderot trainings have been particularly keen to learn, and open to the new material. "Sometimes, when we train psychiatrists or psychologists, we get some resistance to this new language, but in Israel there is a real thirst to try any new promising technique to treat the ever increasing numbers of patients suffering from trauma-related conditions," Ross says.

With close to 700 missiles landing in Sderot since the start of the year and increasing daily since the start of Israel's offensive in Gaza, there is a need for more courses like Ross's. "We ran a course for the general public this week, in SE Emotional First Aid - a technique that everyone can use to self regulate, whenever there is stress and traumatic arousal," she notes.

Ross is scheduled to return in March to teach more advanced courses on Somatic Experiencing, and she also wants to start a new program to train the city's teachers to identify troubled children, work with them and show them how to manage their emotions and keep from falling into the trauma vortex. She believes that "We can change a collective trauma vortex by starting with the young. They are our future."

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