

Rehabilitate Yourself

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Not only psychologists and psychiatrists can treat trauma or help the population traumatized by Qassam rockets to cope. With the method that Gina Ross has developed, every one is capable of freeing themselves from these difficult events. How? One must simply join the Healing Vortex.

When Ziva Ben-Shitrit from Sderot hears the alarm that signals “Red Alert”, she gathers her four children and waits with them until the fury passes in a makeshift defense room: a strip of masking tape separates between it and the rest of the rooms in the house -- and actually that’s all. No reinforced cement walls, no heavy metal door; a brown strip is all that defines the temporary, improvised security area of the Ben-Shitrit family.

Until a few weeks ago, the tension and anxiety during the intense periods of rocket attacks were intolerable; the children would cry, and Ziva, herself anxious, would be hard pressed to calm them. But since she read the book by American psychotherapist Gina Ross, “Beyond the Trauma Vortex to the Healing Vortex” (Nord Publications), a big change has taken place in her household. Even during the most stressful moments that external reality dictates, there is an atmosphere that, were it not for the threatening situation, could be described as almost serene. Ben-Shitrit reminds her children that they have the power to control their situation, and teaches them how to breathe correctly and about what to think, while in the background the clamor of the war outside can be heard. The confidence instilled in her by this self-healing method even made it possible for her to arrive about two weeks ago for the launching of the Hebrew edition of the book in Tel Aviv while leaving her children at their home in Sderot, and this on the very day that a rocket landed in the “Outer Ashkelon” shopping center, only two hours after the family had been shopping there. In the midst of the rage surrounding her life, she feels that she has a measure of control. A small measure, but significant.

Ben-Shitrit, a spokeswoman on road safety for the Department of Education in the Southern District, drove a few weeks ago with fellow spokeswomen to attend a seminar at the Nord Institute in Tivon. The seminar was conducted by Dr. Ofra Eylon, and covered treatment options and methods of implementing them. At the conclusion, Eylon presented her with Ross’ book as a gift, and Ben-Shitrit read it and became captivated.

What in the book spoke to you?

“For a long time I did not take care of myself – I didn’t have the energy to pursue professional public services, to get through the long lines. Upon reading the book, I understood that I am taking care of others rather than me, Ziva. I understood that I need therapy, and the book provided me with immediate tools to help me take care of myself. It helped me to understand that we – the residents of Sderot – really have a problem, and it showed me how it is possible to try and treat it. I also learned to assess the condition of my children and to offer them support.”

Ben-Shitrit has lived in Sderot since her birth, about forty years ago. Her parents arrived in the town straight from Morocco. She loves Sderot, but also fears it. She doesn’t want to leave, but her children sometimes pressure her in that direction. On the evening of the reception in honor of Ross’ book, Ben-Shitrit told about life in the shadow of enormous fear and difficulty, about her son who has lately been under cardiological watch, perhaps because of the situation or perhaps not,

and about the ability to find trivial pleasures even amidst the harsh reality of her life. There was not a dry eye in the house upon hearing her story.

Hitchhiking in Gush Katif

Gina Ross did not know Ben-Shitrit, but directed her writing to people like her, ordinary heroes of life who are coping with baggage of hardship and distress. The handbook to the public is destined to provide answers to those who live in the shadow of the trauma, and to make it possible for them to heal.

Ross, an elegant woman whose face glows with tenderness and delight, was born in 1947 in Syria. Immediately after her birth, her family immigrated to Lebanon, and when she was ten she moved with her family to Europe, where they managed to live in Turkey, Switzerland and Italy. Finally, they settled among the Jewish community in Brazil. Gina, who attended a French school in Brazil, made aliyah to Israel in 1970. In the course of her studies in the Bezalel Art Institute, she met the man who would later become her husband. They were married in Los Angeles, and wandered from there to Canada and back again to the United States. Eventually she studied psychology and fine arts and has exhibited her art in a number of shows. Today she is a mother of two who resides in Los Angeles, while her parents remain in Brazil. One of her sisters resides in Ashkelon, another target for the Qassam trauma.

Her sensitivity to the subject of trauma, tells Ross, originated from her own private life experience – the life in Syria, the sudden departure from Lebanon at the onset of the civil war there, and the adjustment to life in Brazil when she was nine. She is fluent in seven languages, has lived in eight countries, and she also acquired her education in various countries around the world. Currently she is the president of the International Trauma Healing Institute which she founded in Los Angeles, and a lecturer and therapist within varied frameworks and countries.

Gina Ross: “When the media refuses to recognize the healing vortex – the efforts to help those who suffer, the efforts to save them – it creates a secondary trauma by repeatedly showing the traumatic and dramatic images. The media must strive to also report on the healing vortex in order to minimize the trauma’s harm and its influence”

On the eve of the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip, Ross arrived in Israel with the goal of helping residents of Gush Katif by means of the Somatic Experience (SE) method, which was conceived by the American psychologist Peter Levine. She insisted on traveling between the villages by hitchhiking, and asked to meet the residents of the area as they were, not via the television screens and the written press. “I didn’t come here because you are traumatized and need me”, she said to the residents. “Nor is my goal to change what you want to say or do. My story is to build tools that will convey your message to others, without provocation and without interference. In this way a dialog can be established that is rooted in trust and good-will, and that will help people to come through this most difficult period more easily. When you are calmer, you can spread your message with much greater success.

“Trauma is a kind of a dynamic energy whirlpool that doesn’t stop, and parallel to it the brain also has within it a vortex of self healing. Around this were built techniques for coping that can help. In this way it is possible to bring people to understand the vortex of others, and to facilitate communications with one another”.

A Gentle Pendulum

Peter Levine himself had researched the subject of trauma by observing the reactions of animals in nature during times of distress. He found that the animals respond in three different ways to life threatening situations: there are those which befriend the attacker, those which run away as fast as possible (especially when they are in an inferior position), and those who freeze by paralyzing their internal systems, making them appear to be dead. This paralysis saves certain animals from death when their attacker thinks they are carcasses and leaves them alone, or just doesn't notice them. A deer which is threatened by a leopard, for example, freezes in place, and after the predator has left, it awakens and starts a series of strong trembles that release the tension stored up inside.

Human beings, discovered Levine, do not fully get out of the paralysis that takes hold of them during times of external pressure. Thus, even though the traumatic event has ended, in the mind of the person who experienced it the trauma continues to exist, awakened anew again and again. A person who is unaware of this trauma vortex sees himself as weak, or projects the root of the problem onto others. Levine believed that it is possible to adopt the solution of animals in nature in order to alleviate the pressure imprisoned in the body; he claimed that, as part of the healing process one must periodically initiate the "trauma vortex" that will act parallel to the other vortex existing in the brain, the "healing vortex", which derives its energy from the inner resources of the person. "During the therapy process under the method that Levine developed, the inner pendulum swings gently between the side of the trauma and the side of healing, between the difficult, uncomfortable places and the good memories that will allow a fresh start", explains Ross.

While relying on Levine's approach, Ross developed a system of healing traumas, and she tries to apply her techniques to entire social segments. As she sees it, not only doctors and care givers can help with healing trauma, but rather everyone who has an influence on individuals and groups: teachers, consultants, media and army personnel and community leaders, as well as private individuals themselves. "My model is based on the participation of all the relevant professionals – from the field of education, medicine, psychology and military to the media", says Ross. "They are liable to provide an answer, each in his own field, to the trauma experienced by the individual".

What is role of the media in this matter?

"The media's role is to report on reality, and both trauma and tragedy are part of reality. But because trauma, by its nature, is contagious, the people who report it are caught in the trauma vortex and find it difficult to cover other facets of reality as well. When the media finds it difficult to see the healing vortex – all the work that is being done in this field around the world, the efforts to help those who are suffering, the efforts to save them – it reports only the trauma and the violence, and thus creates a secondary trauma by repeatedly showing the traumatic and dramatic images. So the media must strive to also report on the healing vortex in order to correctly represent reality, to help the people who suffer harness the resources available to them, and to minimize the trauma's harm and its influence".

Should this coping be done on an international level?

I believe that the occurrence of traumatic distress is part of every day reality around the world due to wars and terrorism. Even places that are quiet and undisturbed, like the island of Bali, share this feeling. When such a large group of people around the world lives under unrelenting stress, it caused the entire human race to be stressed. In such a situation it is easy to unite an entire population with inflammatory propaganda, to cause them to direct their anger toward an external enemy, and to encourage within them feelings of revenge. The result is huge waves of anger that were caused by people who in other circumstances would act in a totally different, normal manner. Yes, violence has become an epidemic worldwide, and trauma is its potent fuel".

According to Ross, trauma also distorts personal, social and national rationalizations, and causes human beings to dwell only on what has been done to them, while ignoring their own responsibility for what is happening. As a result, they twist historical facts and ignore the conditions that created their traumatic situation. "Model Ross", which she has developed, seeks to heal the collective nervous system. "Trauma healing in the realm of the masses is essential to advance world peace", write Ross in her book. "Learning to heal trauma in the collective sense could be the key that will help us to minimize violence and to support a peace seeking climate".

Connecting to the reptilian brain

Beside the trauma vortex, claims Ross, exists the healing vortex, which enables the traumatic event to be absorbed within the flow of life. "Studies have shown that the human mind is flexible", writes Ross. "It is capable of renewal at any moment and of bringing the living body back into balance. The most significant finding is that the mind is capable of generating new neurological connections that are influenced and supported by relationships and experiences that we go through during the course of our entire life span.

"The healing vortex, or the anti-vortex, is created in our nervous system at one and the same time as the trauma vortex. Nevertheless, when the influence of the trauma is overly destructive, the healing vortex requires helpful techniques in order to function: awareness and resources will help it get into gear and leap forward. With the help of a stronger healing vortex we can process our traumatic experience and incorporate it into the flow of life. Resolving our trauma makes us stronger and even helps us discover powers that we never knew existed".

The person who needs to cope with trauma has at his disposal various ways of involving the healing vortex in order to heal the symptoms and return a feeling of health and security to his nervous system. He has the ability to release the excess energy which is still trapped in his body a long time after the tragedy occurred. When we are able to release this trapped and unutilized energy our body stops manufacturing the hormones it prepares for self defense. We stop internalizing the threat and anticipating that the trauma will come back to haunt us. Then and only then, finally, it will be possible to move forward. Ross wants to remind her readers that it is within their power to oppose the pull of the trauma vortex toward negative reactions. Understanding the various characteristics of the trauma vortex is liable to help free them from it; understanding the characteristics of the healing vortex will enable making informed choices that will help them cope.

The trauma experience, according to Ross, is on the one hand enormously destructive in its power, yet, simultaneously, it also has power to strengthen the person and endow him with a new appreciation of his life. Successfully conquering the trauma is also likely to give us a deeper understanding of the suffering of others. In her book, Ross provides her readers with a "healing tool box". Just as physical training strengthens the body's muscles, she claims, so it is possible to strengthen spiritual immunity by developing and practicing healthy responses to oppose the trauma. The reader who does the exercises learns how to incorporate the different parts of his mind and to return control to the thinking brain.

Among the rest, Ross shows how to focus awareness of the senses, apart from logic and thought, in order to connect to the primordial brain, or "reptilian brain", which speaks in the language of feelings and symbols and enables contact with the healing vortex. She suggests practicing the language of the senses and devoting time to movements – in order to let the body release the excess traumatic energy confined within it. In our efforts to remain safe, explains Ross, the trauma, by its nature, causes us to shrink and become the smallest of targets; however, if this shrinkage becomes permanent – and the nervous system is included in this mode – we lose the ability to heal. Our reality becomes limited and our actions in turn become based on fear. We stop growing and being involved in life, and we avoid inter-personal relationships and new experiences. In healing the trauma, the goal is to liberate the nervous system from the paralysis, so that it can activate the healing and release mechanisms. Other exercises deal with

preparing an inventory of resources – for example, a list of hobbies and trips, internal resources such as a sense of humor and imagination, and negative issues such as lack of money or lack of social support. Ross also suggests to “import” coping strategies from the past and from the future (via use of imagination), and so on.

How would your book help those who suffer different types of trauma?

“With its guidance, people will succeed in identifying more easily the first symptoms of distress, and since they will have caught it in time, they would be able to find release and to ease their burden. They will also develop awareness of the fact that the trauma vortex is a natural reaction of the body and the brain to situations of external pressure. They will understand that when they are unable to activate their normal defense mechanisms, they have another, alternative technique at their disposal: the healing vortex, which reminds us and teaches us something that our nervous system already knows. With its help we will return to our animal instincts and reconnect with them through our thinking ability”.

INSET:

Effective but not Proven

Dr. Danny Brom, director of the Israel Center for the Treatment of Psychotrauma, says that the technique brought by Ross bestows awareness and tools previously unknown in Israel – awareness according to which traumatic experiences cause paralysis in the nervous system, and the way to liberate it lies in focusing on the body, and not necessarily through words. “The SE method is being used in many countries”, says Brom, “but it is not yet considered accepted by science, and there have not been research studies to prove its effectiveness. I would be pleased if this were done. The method is interesting, and my clinical impression is that it is useful and helpful in a way that is a little different from other methods.”

Do you use this method in the Center for Treatment of Psychotrauma?

“Most of our caregivers have attended SE seminars, as an additional tool for treatment of people who suffer from post traumatic problems.”

In the long run, are there more post traumatic casualties in Israel?

“Research indicates that among Israeli adults about 9-10 percent suffer from full post traumatic distress syndrome. Among children the estimate is 5-7 percent. In Sderot we can see clearly how the exposure to violence continues to strike: the percentage of sufferers from this disturbance is increasing all the time”.

Can the general population actually make use of Ross’ book, without professional intervention?

“I believe that people, like Ziva Ben-Shitrit from Sderot for example, can derive benefit in order to understand what is happening to them and to gain guidance to what can help in coping and what is liable to hinder”.