

Reactivity

In PTSD, once we have been triggered, what follows may be termed reactivity. It is a combination of thoughts, emotions and physiological responses to the triggering. Being triggered and reacting is a very natural process. It is also a very primitive process. In PTSD, due to the fact that our higher brain functions shut down under stress, we tend often to react in very primitive ways. And of course this very frequently gets us into trouble. For example we may lash out and behave in a way that we really don't want.

This reactivity is actually a reactive sequence. It is as if there is an alarm center in our brain. I picture it as a big empty room with monitors in the center and posters plastered all over the walls, ceiling and floor. At least for us with PTSD there are a lot of posters, maybe even filing cabinets full of them. These posters depict images of past traumas in great detail including sights, sounds, smells, tastes and physical sensations. Watching the monitors are two big dumb guys that don't have a lick of sense between them, Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. All they do is watch the monitors and look for anything that looks suspiciously like anything on any of the posters. Whenever they spot a similarity, without thinking, they sound the alarm. This message goes directly to another part of the brain that is the fail safe for the alarm system. Its job is to filter out false alarms. But during childhood trauma this part has gotten damaged. Consequently, it doesn't filter nearly as well as it should and a lot of false alarms get through.

Reactivity first manifests as physiological sensations and then emotions before any thought process takes place. Studies of brain function have demonstrated that in persons with PTSD when they are stressed, the primitive brain stem, the reactive lizard brain, gets activated. It is only some time later that the thinking part of the brain, the cerebral cortex, comes back on line. In people who don't have PTSD, the filtering body does its job correctly and the cerebral cortex gets activated right away to begin to process the stress and deal constructively and successfully with it.

You may be wondering why we have this mechanism in our brain that functions in a way that bypasses thought. It is essential to keep us from falling down all the time. If every time you tripped on an uneven place in the sidewalk you had to take time to think what to do to regain your balance, you would keep landing on the pavement. There is no time for the relatively slow process of thinking and deciding. So these automatic parts of the brain do their jobs and keep us safe. But somehow in childhood trauma they get messed up. The alarm center becomes over active and the filtering center becomes less effective. We have been conditioned to be on guard for danger and to not rule out anything that might harm us.

Another interesting aspect of our reactivity is that it first reaches consciousness when we feel something going on in our bodies. We feel sensations that are like what we felt when something bad happened before. We feel these sensations and we have thoughts in response to the sensations and not the other way around. But often times we act as if it

were the other way around because at other times that also happens, i.e. we have thoughts and those lead to feelings that then produce sensations in our body. When the sensations occur first, we experience them and then we interpret them. Our tendency is to assume that we are feeling the emotion that corresponds with the bodily sensations that we are having. If our body is doing a "slow burn" then we tend to assume that we are mad. If our body is feeling queasy then we think that we are scared. And so on.

Each of us has a particular set of reactions that is unique to us. This is because our reactivity is directly tied to the nature of our trauma. One person screams another complains, a third argues and a fourth falls silent. Each of these reactions is characteristic to that particular person and is based on the nature of their traumatic situation. Physiological reactions are also specific and related to our trauma history. Do we get a headache, a stomach ache, a back ache, a queasy feeling, a dizzy feeling, etc.? Whichever it is, each of these can be tied to some aspect of our trauma history.

Questioning our reactivity is a very helpful tool in managing our PTSD. Questioning our reactivity is the antidote for acting on it and doing something we may regret. Incidentally, questioning other's reactivity is the antidote for being triggered by their behavior and reacting to it in a way that we may regret. When we are reactive it is because we have been triggered. When other people are reactive it is because they have been triggered.

Questioning our reactivity means not assuming that our bodily sensations are a true reflection of our thoughts and emotions. Instead of telling ourselves that we must be scared or angry or sad or whatever because our body is feeling thus and so, we should tell ourselves that we have probably been triggered. We should start wondering what has triggered us and exploring the connections between whatever happened and our trauma histories. This will give us a great many more options besides just being reactive. And of course then we will be able to have a much better outcome as being reactive almost always produces a bad outcome unless we are in real immediate danger. In the case of true danger, reactivity is exactly what we need. It is important to be able to jump out of the way of a speeding bus.

Desired Outcome: To learn to recognize reactivity as such, to question it and to redirect our behavior whenever we are triggered and reactive.

Discussion Starters: How has my reactivity has taken me into behaviors that I have regretted? What are the sources in my history of my particular forms of reactivity? What are my bodily sensations when I'm being reactive? How could I make myself more aware of these sensations as being part of my reactivity? What are the interpretations that I give to these bodily sensations? How could I be more aware of these interpretations? In what other ways might I be able to break this sequence of reactivity? What mnemonic devices might I use to help remind me to question my reactivity?