

Victim Identity?

Are we motivated to cling to our status as trauma victim? Even if we call ourself a trauma survivor or even a trauma thriver, we are still focused on the trauma. Why is overcoming the effects of our trauma and functioning normally so difficult for us? Obviously there are many answers to this question including the fact that there are physiological changes in our brain due to the trauma. Unfortunately these changes contribute in a big way to our attitudes and behaviors. But, is there another factor operating here? Do we take at least some of our sense of identity from the fact that we have a history of trauma? How important to us is this sense of identity as a trauma victim? How big a role does it play in our overall sense of ourselves? What problems would it pose for us if we decided to give that up? Would we feel that we were not being true to ourselves?

If we could choose to give up our identity as a person with a history of trauma, would we feel like we were abandoning a part of ourself? We did suffer trauma. We did go through Hell. And, for most of us that Hell has continued in one form or another throughout our entire life. Now all of a sudden we are supposed to stop having PTSD and start functioning normally? I don't think so! And yet I want that more than anything. I want that for me and I want that for you. If we could have that, or even, more realistically, just some of that, could we do so with a sense that we were being true to ourselves?

I think that part of the problem here is that we are each one of us many selves. That is to say that there are many facets or parts to us that may be in fact fairly diverse. This is more obvious in the person with multiple personalities where each of these personalities has a separate identity. But whether our mind is configured like that or not, we have been and therefore still are several different people. Therefore we have, somewhere inside of us the little child who existed unblemished before any trauma occurred. For some of us this little child began being traumatized so early that we have no recollection of this pristine state. Nevertheless, it did exist, even if only in theory, even if only in utero.

The question therefore becomes, which of ourselves do we want to be true to? Do we want to be true to the self that was traumatized, the self that survived, the self that we have become or the self that existed before the trauma? I wonder if we can be true to all of these in some way? Wouldn't it be great if at least at times, from time to time, we could just be normal? Wouldn't it be great if we could feel normal? I submit that when we do this, if we do it, we are being true to that pristine little child who existed before the trauma and to the adult that child would have become without the trauma. I challenge you to at least at times let yourself be true to this part of yourself.

The problem however, is that we did suffer trauma and we are still struggling with the after effects of that trauma. We need also to be true to that part of ourselves. I think a big part of being true to that part of ourselves is doing what I call trauma management. This is a big umbrella term that includes everything from going to therapy and belonging to a support group

for trauma survivors to honoring our triggers and avoiding those things that we know might tend to set us off. I think that it does not feel like we are being true to ourselves if we try to deny this part.

We want to overcome and are trying to overcome the effect of our trauma. It does not feel like we are being very true to ourselves if we dwell in it, wallow in it or allow ourselves to be ruled by it. If we try to deny the effects of our trauma, then trying to overcome the effects of our trauma may feel like a betrayal of ourselves. It may feel like we are pretending that the trauma never happened. Or as we try to overcome our trauma effects, it may feel like we are admitting that it wasn't that bad or that we made it up or exaggerated it as a play for attention or sympathy. For many of us, this message has of course been reinforced by the denials of those around us. I am reminded of my first therapist, who, not knowing the whole story, concluded that what had happened to me was "normal sibling rivalry".

The challenge is to find the balance that honors and is true to all the parts of ourselves. The question is how? How can we be true to ourselves in every way? It is a big challenge. We want neither to renounce the part of ourselves that suffers PTSD nor the part that existed before the trauma and the person we would have become if there had been no trauma. We want to acknowledge and embrace all these parts and respond to them in an integrated way. This is a daunting task, but I think that it can be done. Let's explore how to do this!

Therapy is the key. I am a therapist not only because I have an innate curiosity about people, but also because I love helping people and I have a great believe in the beneficial effects of the therapeutic relationship. In trauma therapy the first and most important thing is to establish a warm and trusting relationship between therapist and client. Once this has been established, then the client with the assistance of the therapist, can explore the various aspect of their psyche and move in successive approximations toward a state of integration in which all of the parts of the psyche are recognized, acknowledged and validated. This is the only way that I can see that any of us can ever reach a point of satisfactory integration in the face of a history of trauma.

There is no way to unring that bell once we have suffered trauma. It is counter-productive to try to deny that part of ourselves. What we have to do is identify, recognize and integrate all the parts of ourselves into a functioning complete person who has been impacted by trauma but is not ruled by that history. We need to be true to all the parts of ourselves and not allow ourselves to be ruled by any one part no matter how justified that may seem one way or another.

Desired Outcome: Recognizing and acknowledging all the parts of ourselves and finding a way to be true to all our parts simultaneously.

Discussion Starters: Can you remember who you were and how you were before your trauma? If not, can you imagine that little person? It can be very helpful to look at an early picture of yourself if you have one. Now can you imagine how that person would have developed and who they would have become had there been no trauma? Can you be true to that person? How would you go about doing that? Given the existence of that separate reality, can you find a way to be true to both that person and the person you have become as a result of your trauma? How will you accomplish this balance? Does this feel true? What would help make it fell more true?