

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) & Transformational Breath®

by Elif Clarke, Transformational Breath Trainer

PTSD is an **anxiety disorder** caused by very stressful, frightening or distressing events, such as war, sexual abuse, severe neglect, being held hostage, natural disasters, witnessing violent deaths and so on.

During these traumatic events, the body's natural mechanism when faced with danger kicks in, with the release of adrenalin. And this in turn triggers a series of physical changes in the body aimed at generating energy, to enable us to survive through fleeing or fighting danger.

The main symptoms experienced include flashbacks (traumatic re-living of the event, including images, sound, emotions and physical sensations) and nightmares. These symptoms in turn can result in severe anxiety and/or angry reactions or avoidance of any triggers that may remind us of the incident in some way.

Symptoms of PTSD develop if the body is subject to ongoing and constant high levels of arousal, combined with the avoidance of trauma triggers, long after the actual trauma event occurrence. We do our best to avoid triggers of trauma. Under these circumstances, therefore, the PTSD event remains un-processed. Psychotherapists and psychologists are accustomed to working with conversation, with talking, with insights and discussion to address this situation.

Most of the existing therapies, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Narrative Exposure Therapy, and cognitive restructuring therapies focus on the cognitive aspect of the trauma, that is, what we consciously know; ignoring the instincts and body's response to the trauma.

Transformational Breath® differs from existing therapies, in that it looks directly at how the body and breath process and sustain psychological issues. It is a unique therapy tool which includes sound, movement, acupressure and affirmations to address and process memories and bodily sensations which were stored in the body at the time of the trauma. As we know PTSD develops because of our avoidance of trauma reminders. So, what happens to the emotions and memories that were not processed?

Transformational Breath suggests that we push them into our subconscious by holding our breath during the trauma. Although holding the breath may ease the intensity of our feelings in the moment, it does not make them go away. They are also stored in the whole respiratory system as tension and pain, causing restricted breath patterns.

Therefore, rather than breathing from both the abdomen and chest, the result is that we breathe with just chest or abdomen with little physical movement. Thus our continued shallow

and restricted breathing patterns become habitual creating chronic tension and distress within the body.

During Transformational Breath, a non-pause between exhale and inhale assists those trauma memories and feelings stored at a mental and emotional level to be integrated and processed.

One of the key therapeutic tools of Transformational Breath is movement and sound which are used to help the breath to open and flow thus enabling the patient to process surfaced painful emotions. This approach is similar to Peter Levine's somatic experiencing therapy, which is a body-awareness approach to trauma. He was inspired to study stress on the animal nervous system, when he realised that animals are constantly under threat of death, yet show no symptoms of trauma.

Peter Levine discovered that trauma is initiated when there is a threat to survival and the outcome is that the body freezes. When fight and flight are not options, the animal freezes and immobilises, like "playing dead". This makes it less of a target. This applies to the human body too. However, this reaction is time-sensitive. It needs to run its course, and the massive energy that was prepared for fight or flight gets discharged, through shaking and trembling. If the immobility phase doesn't complete successfully, then that charge remains trapped, and from the body's perspective it is still under threat.

So, in Transformational Breath, the kicking and pounding with sound that we use help the person to process and integrate the trauma memories and emotions. Therefore, Transformational Breath may also encourage the person to relive the trauma within a safe and secure therapeutic relationship. Once the physical arousal is reduced, the person becomes able to process traumatic memories, and they will no longer feel that they are under constant imminent danger.

Elif Clarke is founder of Breathing Joy and co-founder of the Big Breath Company based in London. She worked twenty years as a psychologist for the NHS. During that time her main specialism was helping clients who suffered from **Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**. She wrote the article about the disorder and why she found Transformational Breath® such a useful tool.