

BEING STUCK is both Psychological and Physiological

I would like to share this letter and my response to the writer, as I know that there are others who would benefit from knowing more about how the mind and body work together to resolve overwhelming life events.

Dear M,

Dear George,

A friend of mine, J. D., who has been seeing you thought that you may be able to assist me. I am recently divorced from a ten-year marriage and have two children 4 and 6 years of age. My ex-husband and I went to counseling and decided that we would do our best to respect each other and raise the children with as little hurt as possible. In short, we have been amicable, at least on the outside.

Now, after a year since our split, I am beginning to find all sorts of emotions rising within me. My thoughts keep going over the events of the night when he told me he wanted a divorce. I have this rage that leaps out of me at unexpected times and find myself getting angry at little things that didn't bother me before. I'm not able to concentrate when I am at work and I'm having more headaches and pains in my joints. When I hear noises in the house at night I get really frightened and panicky. This has only started to happen in the last few weeks. More and more I find myself crying, out of fear for myself and my family.

I've tried all sorts of things during this divorce process. I've been reading self-help books. I've gone to counseling. I've done self-affirming messages. I work out at the gym and have even increased my social network, facing my fear, as it were. But still my anger and fear seem to be increasing. Can you be of assistance to me. I'm feeling very stuck.

Regards, M (a prospective client)

Thank you for your letter. Your intention to empower and rebuild your life is a remarkable resource that will support you to resolve the trauma of your loss and the symptoms of post-traumatic stress that you described in your letter.

Much has been learned of the experience of traumatic stress in the past 20 years and the unsung heroes are once again the Vietnam Veterans who experienced much trauma at war and afterwards, at home. The psychobiology of stress and trauma has been one of the most important advances in the

health field today. We have learned that *the shock of any overwhelming life event needs to be allowed to complete successfully. When completion happens a sense of mastery follows.*

There are two types of trauma. The first type, *a shock trauma is when too much stuff happens too fast*, causing a state of overwhelming helplessness. This "stuff" could be a car accident, a natural mishap, a death or loss of a loved one, abuse, violence or any other overwhelming circumstance. The second type of trauma is *a developmental trauma, neglect trauma, this is when too little stuff happens too late*. This "stuff" is what a person needs to grow in a healthy fashion such as: nurturance, security, recognition and respect. Most of us have a mixture of both unresolved shock and developmental trauma that can be triggered by new events. Sometimes the new trauma tends to fuse with the old unresolved trauma.

It's OK to feel stuck. It's part of a set of defensive responses to an overwhelming situation. Let me explain.

What you have been attempting to heal is the rupture or split-up of a marriage, the breach of a significant relationship, the break-up of a family structure, and the disruption of a lifestyle. ***This is a big deal!*** The shifting relationships in your family may link to previous injuries and wounds. A vital loss effects and affects present and subsequent changes, socially, psychologically, but as well, - physiologically. Each of these realms of experiencing are connected and, each needs to be resolved. You may have mentally adjusted to your new life, but your body needs to discharge the energy that was built up during the "break". It's not just a matter of putting the pieces together. It's also a matter of clearing and cleansing the bodily processes of your life, not just emotionally and socially but as well, physiologically.

I would like to discuss with you the nature of trauma and how we can work to resolve it as you rebuild your life.

Trauma can be defined as a state of overwhelming helplessness due to an actual or perceived life-threatening event. Our lives occur within a space, having boundaries, that we call – "my life". Each person wants pleasure and safety in their space. When the boundary of "my life" is ruptured, or threatened with rupture, *traumatic stress takes place within the nervous system of the body to meet that threat and to survive that threat.*

During the traumatic event a part of your brain known as the Reptilian Brain tells the body that there is a threat. It does so by releasing hormones that activate the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system. In effect, these hormones alert the body to prepare for a defensive response - a fight or a flight response to the threat. You can notice this because the body becomes alert, the breath quickens, the heart rate increases sending blood away from the skin and into the muscles, the field of vision narrows as the eyes look for, center on and focus upon the threat. These are but a few of the many preparatory responses to threat. As we execute our defensive response successfully, we gain a sense of accomplishment. We have met the task at hand and won! Victory is ours! We have mastered our fate. Thus, the threatening event becomes a learning experience. We store the information of our success in our bodies and gain a sense of mastery from the overall experience. It's the difference

between being hit by the ball when learning to play catch and feeling helpless; to becoming a skilled player who does not feel stress when the ball is thrown.

However, when the threat is imminent or protracted and one can't flee nor fight, (like in torture, abuse, loss) the brain may also release hormones to activate the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system and a freeze state can occur, - a tonic immobility. When this happens, the parasympathetic nervous system has just activated its system to slam on the brakes while simultaneously, the sympathetic nervous system continues to "step on the gas" activating a full fight or full flight response. In short, you are going 100 mph at a dead stop. You are in the freeze response of a shock trauma. Your fight and flight responses have become "frozen" and thus are incomplete. *If these fight/flight responses are not completed, then to that degree you will experience immobility, a stuck-ed-ness.* Symptoms may arise to compensate such high charges of survival energy seeking release. These highly activated incomplete biological responses to the threat need to be completed and discharged then the energy of the traumatic reactions will be processed, and healing will ensue. The symptoms that you referred to in your letter need to be understood and processed to begin to dissipate, for healing to ensue.

A great deal of energy is consumed by symptoms maintaining these levels of activation in your neuromuscular and nervous system. The brain continues to respond locking into the threat 7/24/365 as if still under the trauma, the threat. This is the post-traumatic stress response. Your nervous system continues to prepare the body for fight, flight and/or freeze. These traumatic reactions are the likely basis of many symptoms of anger, fear, anxiety, headaches, fatigue, chronic pain, hyper-arousal, muscle stiffness, panic, rage and terror.

Earlier, I said it's OK to feel stuck. This is because you are stuck at a very deep level and your awareness of your feelings and sensations in your body is a vastly important resource to your healing. Denial is one of the symptoms born out of unresolved traumatic stress. It is good that you are beginning to feel again, and feeling stuck is appropriate, at this very deep core level. Your body is beginning to thaw out from the freeze response and is seeking to complete the impulses of the defensive responses that were thwarted during the "break-up".

Fortunately, we are now aware that all this "stuff" just isn't in your mind. It is also stored in the neuromuscular, glandular and many other systems of your body; seeking to surface, to discharge the activation, to complete the biological imperatives of the defensive orienting responses to the threat and master the experience. You can learn how to deal with and process these core biological states and energies. *Your body is now giving you the opportunity to work through the traumatic stress of your traumatic divorce process.* The prolonged threats and/or neglects have receded. You are readying to begin the work of actively thawing out and discharging the activations (the stored frozen energy) in your body.

I would enjoy working with you. Your ability to seek assistance is a strength of yours that is noble. Your un-ease may be due to chronic activation as mentioned before, the brain continues to respond as if under threat. It is my understanding that the anger and fear that you are now experiencing is due to past activated energy that was frozen and contained during the overwhelming events of your divorce and earlier past experiences. For instance, it may be that you had impulses to *fight* to keep your marriage and life as it was, but you didn't. As well,

during this time, you may have felt impulses to *flee* from the pain and terror of these events, but you didn't. And again, at other times you may have just stood in place, incapable of being able to move, to talk, to think, - the *freeze* response.

The important thing to remember is that **these defensive responses are natural.** They are controlled by your involuntary nervous system, not your voluntary conscious mind. They need to be released by addressing the underlying psychobiological stress patterns without over-activating the system again. This is done through a felt somatic healing experience of self-regulation, resourcing yourself, tracking your felt/senses carefully, pacing the natural rhythm of your instinctual capacity to heal, and completing the thwarted defensive responses in a healing fashion.

Also, it is most important to do a little at a time. One may re-traumatize themselves by working in an overly regressive or cathartic fashion, by trying to do too much too fast or pushing a healing, without giving the nervous system time to digest and heal the experiencing. This process is best done with the help of a trauma specialist to guide you, knowing the terrain of trauma, in the body and the mind. Work with one who can help manage the level of traumatic stress activation, so that you do not re-traumatize the body. Easy does it. Also, remember to give yourself credit for how much you have grown so far.

*Best regards,
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