

Recapitulating Early Trauma

by

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One of the most confusing, and generally least understood effects of experiencing emotional shock and/or traumatisation is the way in which our body and our psyche become conditioned. This conditioning causes us to unconsciously re-enact the specific dynamics of the trauma in our everyday lives. The earlier the trauma, the more significant the impact it has upon us. This process, known as traumatic re-enactment, or recapitulation is the focus of this article.

One way in which we can begin to understand the effects of traumatic recapitulation is by looking at the effects of trauma on the brain, especially the developing brain of the baby or young child. Whenever we have an intense experience, synaptic connections are made at an alarming rate. These connections form neural superhighways that become reinforced by the high level of stress hormones and neuropeptides circulating in the bloodstream. These connections do not just encode our physiological state at the time but also encompass our psychological and emotional state, as well as any particular survival strategies that were used.

These neural superhighways become activated when we find ourselves in a situation that is similar in some way to the original event. For example, if as a result of experiencing intense pressure during birth, a baby gets stuck he may start to feel a high level of frustration and anxiety. As a result of this experience, his developing brain will wire the whole of this situation into a neural superhighway. This wiring will include the posture of the baby at the time, the feelings of intense pressure, the sense of being stuck, the anxiety and frustration together with the attempt to fight against it.

If in later life, this individual finds himself re-experiencing any one of these conditions, the neural superhighway formed at the time will start to be activated and he may become flooded with sensations and emotions that seem completely out of proportion and irrelevant to his current situation. This way of being will become identified with and he may just resign himself to the fact that he is the type of guy that doesn't handle pressure well and finds that he gets really frustrated and anxious whenever he is in a pressured situation.

However, this is not true. These ways of being are often related to how we have learnt to be rather than who we truly are. Our true nature has had to adapt and distort in order to contain

the effects of the traumatic experience. These effects of these experiences influence every aspect of who we are, including our physical health, emotional state, thoughts, beliefs, behaviour and speech.

The effects of early traumatic experience go even further as we will unconsciously recreate these dynamics in our lives in some way. There are several ways in which this occurs. We may attract specific people/situations to us as if we were some sort of magnet for them. Conversely, we may also find ourselves attracted to these same people/situations. Another way in which we can recreate these effects is to behave in specific unconscious ways that then causes others to act out the dynamic of the original trauma upon us. For example, if we have experienced rejection early in life, we may act in such a way that tries to stop people from rejecting us, such as with clingy, needy or controlling behaviour. However, in doing this, we find that people become tired and frustrated with us and are actually more likely to reject us as a result, creating the very situation that we were trying to avoid in the first place.

A number of recapitulation strategies have been described by various researchers. The following are based on the work of William Emerson and Karlton Terry, two leading teachers and practitioners in the field of prenatal and birth trauma resolution. As well as these, I have also added a number of insights from my own research and clinical practice. By understanding these different strategies, and the ways in which they are at work in our lives, we can begin to bring awareness to how we have learnt to do ourselves. This creates the possibility for new options to become available in similar situations in the future.

Direct recapitulation

In direct recapitulation, we unconsciously attract, or are attracted to, specific situations and/or people who recreate the exact dynamic of the original trauma towards us. For example, if we experienced intense pressure during birth that was overwhelming, we may directly recapitulate this by constantly putting ourselves in relationships and work environments where we feel consistently pressurised and overwhelmed.

Avoidant recapitulation

Avoidant recapitulation is where we unconsciously avoid the specific dynamics of the original trauma. For example, if we experienced some form of early chemical toxicity e.g. maternal smoking, drinking and/or drug use during pregnancy, use of pain-relief medication during birth, we may avoidantly recapitulate this by leading a "clean" lifestyle by not drinking, smoking or doing drugs and making sure that all food and drink is clean, pure and organic. We may even be reluctant to take prescription medication, preferring more natural remedies.

Perpetrator identified recapitulation

This form of recapitulation occurs when we identify with the specific forces of the trauma and project it onto others. This person recapitulates their trauma by becoming an aggressor. An example of this type of recapitulation can be seen in the person who experienced their boundaries being invaded during birth as a result of intense contractions and/or interventions. They may then recapitulate this by being incredibly invasive towards those people around them.

Victim identified recapitulation

Victim identified recapitulation is the exact opposite of perpetrator identified in that we take the dynamics of what has happened to us and put it onto ourselves in such a way that we feel like victims of life. For example, as a result of being pulled out by forceps, an adult may later recapitulate this by feeling completely powerless to prevent others from manipulating, overpowering and controlling them (all feelings that individuals have attributed to a forceps birth), and will in all likelihood attract/be attracted to people who will treat him in this way..

Retroflective identification

In this situation, we take the specific belief that the trauma imprinted and we identify into it. For example, as a result of experiencing abandonment as either a pre-nate or during the birth process, we may feel that this situation is wrong. At this time in our lives, we are unable to differentiate between ourselves and what is happening to us. As a consequence of this, we may begin to believe that in order for us to be in this situation we must have done something wrong. This later becomes "we are wrong". This belief is the one that is then identified with.

Compensatory Retroflection

This form of recapitulation is the opposite of retroflective identification. In this situation, we identify with a belief, but we compensate for it by acting out its opposite. For example, if as a result of early experience we felt that we were a failure, we may compensate for this feeling by needing to be successful. This unconscious drive to be successful will continue unabated unless the underlying feelings of failure, and its causation are addressed.

Victim advocate recapitulation

this recapitulation strategy involves an unconscious projection of the trauma dynamics into the social sphere in order to help and support others. This is most often done by working with others to help them overcome the same dynamics that we experienced. For example, as a result of being disempowered, controlled and manipulated by forceps/ventouse during birth, the victim advocate might become involved in teaching such principles as assertiveness, self-development and empowerment.

Confrontive recapitulation

This strategy requires that people actively seek out and challenge any circumstances, issues and/or social policies that remind them of their original trauma. For example, confrontive recapitulation of early rejection might mean that you feel compelled to work to try to influence social policy with regard to others who are rejected e.g. adoption policy.