

Waking the Tiger Within To Heal Trauma from Accidents and Injuries

For therapists, the controversy surrounding so-called “recovered” traumatic memories that proved to be false raises unsettling questions. Where do these false memories come from? What role does memory actually play in the understanding and treatment of trauma?

To answer these questions, we must begin with the fact that there are two types of memory: implicit, which is unconscious, and explicit, which is conscious memory. The type of memory utilized in learning most physical activities such as riding a bike or even walking is a form of implicit memory called “procedural memory.” Procedural or “body memories” are learned sequences of coordinated “motor acts” chained together into meaningful actions. You may not remember explicitly how and when you learned to ride a bike, for example, but at the appropriate moment the memory of how to do it is implicitly recalled and acted out simultaneously.

The Nature of Trauma Following Stress or Injury

So how does this relate to the topic of trauma? Well, all living creatures live by procedural memory and we know that procedures are primarily non-conscious. In the wild we observe that animals, though threatened routinely, are rarely traumatized. Why? Because trauma is about the *procedures* the organism executes when exposed to overwhelming stress, threat and injury.

In response to threat and injury, animals, including humans, execute biologically based, non-conscious action patterns that prepare them to meet the threat and defend themselves. Some animals freeze on the spot (opossum), while others flee (antelope). After the threat is over, the animal then releases this “survival” energy. We see this manifest in visible shaking and trembling. Once the animal has recovered its balance, it can resume its normal functioning. As one wildlife biologist noted, if an animal does not complete the process, it will not survive. It will die.

Post Trauma and Finding Balance

Of course, humans rarely die from trauma itself, but the failure to neutralize these implicit procedures and restore balance to the body explains the debilitating symptoms of stress disorder in the human animal. All of these coordinated responses are somatically based—they are things that the body does to protect and defend itself. It is when these orienting and defending responses are aborted that we see trauma affect humans. In fact, the bodies of traumatized people portray snapshots of their unsuccessful attempts to defend themselves in the face of threat and injury.

Trauma is fundamentally a highly activated incomplete biological response to threat, frozen in time, and the compulsion that so many trauma survivors have to “remember” is actually a misinterpretation of the profound urge to complete the highly charged survival responses that were aborted at the time they were overwhelmed.

Though it is much easier to prevent trauma, it is possible to heal even deeply entrenched traumatic symptoms by *completing* the incomplete responses to threat, discharging the energy that was released for survival. While explicit memory is accessed primarily through cognition, implicit memory must be reached through the body. *Trauma is implicit!*

Anxiety, Depression, and Trauma Treatment

“Renegotiation” is word that aptly describes the process of healing or resolving trauma. It is the gradual discharge of the highly compressed survival energies, accompanied by a retrospective completion of biological defensive and orienting responses that were frozen at the time of being overwhelmed. This is not to be confused with a cathartic reliving of the traumatic event. That method can actually lead to re-traumatization.

Somatic Experiencing (SE) is a naturalistic approach to the healing of trauma developed over the last twenty-five years. SE is based on the understanding that animals in the wild, though their lives are threatened routinely, are rarely traumatized. They do not suffer ongoing anxiety or symptoms of depression. Their ability to discharge fully the highly activated energies mobilized for survival and then reorient, or resume normal functioning, points to an innate, instinctual capacity for the resolution of trauma.

We now know that the human animal shares this same innate capacity—and it is a potent resource when appropriately utilized. Empowered with these innate resources, people can permit the healing journey to begin, for that journey is biologically based, accessed through feelings and sensations rather than through thoughts and words.

Waking The Tiger is Dr. Peter Levine’s seminal work based on his years of extensive research and firsthand observations. It guides the reader through an understanding of the subtle yet powerful impulses that govern our animal responses to overwhelming life events and includes a series of exercises that will help one focus on bodily sensations.

Out of the shattered fragments of their deeply injured psyches, countless patients have re-emerged from the frozen moment in time when they were overwhelmed by a traumatic event to resume normal, happy, healthy lives by gradually accessing and discharging the energy bound up in the “memory” of the body’s muscles and tissues. This book offers insight, understanding, practical assistance and hope to all who read it.

Waking The Tiger
Peter A. Levine, Ph.D.
North Atlantic Books, 1997

Research Writings from Peter A. Levine, MD, can be reviewed by clicking [Memory, Trauma and Healing](#).