

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS

Emotional pain: the silent killer of spirit

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Dear Susan,

I have worked in broadcasting for 20 years and the past five years have been very painful, as I lost two brothers to suicide and suffer from severe posttraumatic stress syndrome as a result. In your last column you asked how illness has affected one's career, and, although I realize that this is not a physical illness, it has affected my morale, interests and made each day feel like torture. Do you have any ideas about how to move forward?

- Michele

Dear Michele,

When I was about 10, I impressed my parents with the observation that injured feelings hurt more than cuts, scrapes and broken bones. I no longer remember what prompted that piece of juvenilia, but I still hold to it, even if the boundary between psychological and physical illnesses is no longer that meaningful. The best evidence we have now points to anxiety disorders - including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) - as heritable illnesses with biochemical and genetic roots.

Like its cousin, major depression, susceptibility to PTSD runs in families, is far more common among women, and has mortal risks. The trigger is a disaster, or a devastating assault on one's psyche but the groundwork that makes a person vulnerable is laid down by their genes and the subtle flow of neurotransmitters that regulate their emotions. A biochemical stew gone awry is what makes them lose interest in activities they used to love (your work comes to mind), and those suffering from PTSD relive a trauma over and over through flashbacks and panic. Both mimic life-threatening fear reactions that put one on high alert.

With their hearts racing and often unable to sleep or to concentrate, people with PTSD are at increased risk of suicide and substance abuse. They can pass these susceptibilities on to their children, not just through their genes but via their unusual emotional responses - which, amazingly, can alter the genetic capacities of the next generation to handle its own stresses.

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It all sounds ethereal and psychological, but the nuts and bolts are biological. People with PTSD secrete smaller amounts of cortisol, a chemical that helps the body deal with life-threatening events,

and they have smaller hippocampi, a seahorse-shaped organ deep in the brain that is one of its most ancient switching stations for facing down fear.

So what should you do?

First, as a physical illness, take PTSD as seriously as you would a cancer diagnosis, starting with a visit to your physician and a referral to an expert. If you live in a major urban centre, it should be easier to see a specialist: the Homewood Health Centre in Guelph, Ont., and Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health are two world-renowned centres of expertise. As with any health problem, living in a rural region makes access to help trickier, but a treatment plan should include medication, cognitive behavioural therapy and regular follow up visits.

As a workplace veteran, your health and disability plan should cover your absences and treatment, but almost as important is finding renewed purpose in your job and meaningful connections to other people. Therein lies recovery, and the source can be volunteering, involvement in community or church, and research shows, even online support groups. You may feel like the lone survivor of a major catastrophe but if you scratch just a little, you'll find others much like you - PTSD is an unusually common Canadian story, with more than 9 per cent of the population having experienced the disorder, compared with 8 per cent of Americans and less than 2 per cent of Europeans.

Canadians may seem outwardly peaceful but many, like you, have roiling inner lives.

Dear Susan,

I am a certified financial planner in the insurance industry. I now find myself in conflict with the new director of our department and his effect on the business culture. I'm considering going out on my own, or with a partner. Although I've done very well in the past, my worry is that clients will lose confidence in me when I leave the organization.

- *Betwixt and Between*

Dear Betwixt,

I don't know much about financial planning but I do know something about doubt, and it can put the kibosh on opportunity. An experiment by Cornell psychology professors Joyce Ehrlinger and David Dunning found that people who questioned their performance on a test then declined to enter another competition, even though they had actually aced the test, and stood an excellent chance of coming out on top again.

And looking at the connection between self-doubt and financial risk-taking, several European economists tried to figure out how 20,000 Germans would react to a windfall of 100,000 euros they had "won" in a lottery. All were offered the chance to double that sum by investing it, but also stood to lose half of it, say, if the market tanked. The economists discovered that in a sample the size of a small town, men invested more than women, young people invested more than older ones, and that taller people invested more than shorter ones. Most importantly, those who enjoyed taking financial risks saw themselves as happier and more optimistic - although we don't know whether risk-taking or optimism came first. What we do know is that these happy-go-lucky folks were more likely to be self-employed.

No matter where you stand on the risk-taking spectrum, if you're dissatisfied with your work environment, you'll have to change something. And despite your fears, there's little evidence that when it comes to trust, bigger is better or that the public is more likely to glom onto the leviathan than to put their faith in the individual.

In a new book on organizational power of the Internet, *Here Comes Everybody*, New York University professor Clay Shirky shows how the opposite is often true. Armed with a computer and an internet connection, people are relying less and less on corporate structures for direction and reassurance; they can find work, group themselves around common interests, and find like-minded colleagues just fine without them. Self-propelled, self-policing enterprises, websites such as Wikipedia, Flickr and YouTube started out without mission statements, CEOs or an explicit business culture. Their independence from these strictures is part of the attraction, and there's little reason why the power of organizing without organizations might not also work for you.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of [The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap](#).

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