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# PTSD

# Operator's Manual

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**G**ROUP SITS ON A PREMISE THAT POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER comes from an experience anyone would find difficult to integrate into the rest of his/her life. So rather than the experience being processed, whatever that means, it sits outside the normal mode of thinking and hence the normal mode of control. Dissonance in dealing with the experience keeps resolution at bay, allowing the trauma to live its own life. This causes a variety of intrusive and avoidant phenomena.

Not everyone buys this premise. Some view PTSD as character weakness and feel the individual simply does not try hard enough to forget the difficult and focus on pleasant. They remind combat veterans that Vietnam happened 35 years ago. This group views the mind as capable of painting experience any color it wants. The former position sees realities in the world that cannot be changed. In the world of therapy the cognitive/behaviorists reach toward cure, while the existentialists stress limits. The cognitive/behaviorists stress mind over matter. The existentialists say matter really matters. Our group is the latter, believing that some things are forever.

We can run this higher in abstraction, and I personally find it useful to do so. Doing so offers support when one is not counting votes to determine truth. Counseling theory abstracts to philosophy, and at this level we find Spinoza and Descartes. Descartes felt there were two substances, mind and matter. They existed independently although somehow in tandem. Spinoza, on the other hand, saw only one substance with different perspectives. In his view everything is all wound up together. Descartes felt we could determine the world. Spinoza thought we can merely rearrange it. We side with Spinoza. The other position looks too much like wishful thinking.

One's theoretical orientation as a counselor is not simply a reasoned decision. Therapists are drawn to various schools according to their life experience. The orientation chooses them, rather than visa versa. Existentialists are more likely to have experienced



conflict and appreciate the difficulty of resolving it. The cognitive/behavioral people perhaps have had it easier. They aim higher and look for cure. The existentialists aim more deliberately.

Hocking feels it helps to have experienced suffering to be able to appreciate it in others. He is right. But one does not gratuitously seek suffering to become a better therapist. And while misery by itself would not produce therapeutic success, resolved misery probably helps. In looking for a therapist you want someone who has learned from more than textbooks. Textbook learning by itself might be worse than no learning at all. At a minimum you want a person not evangelizing his theoretical perspective and who can respect your position and sovereignty.

People make a mistake in comparing mental with physical trauma. The two live in different worlds. Physical exists in time and space, mental resides in abstraction. Physical wounds heal by themselves. All we do is get things out of their way. But mental requires active attention. If one does not address it a mental trauma exists essentially unchanged, living outside time and space. Trying to forget is not the same as trying to resolve. Time does not heal all wounds, mental lives outside of the earth's revolution or trips around the sun. Mental time is measure by associative "hits". No hits (connections), no time.

Grief occupies a prominent place in our orientation in group. Grown men don't cry simply means grown men don't let go. We see grief as defense; aggression as offense. When group began in 1991 if someone went sad half the room walked out. Today we have succeeded in establishing grief as a legitimate response. The serenity prayer asks: Give me the courage to change the things I can, the serenity to accept the things I can't, and the wisdom to know the difference. It concedes there are things we cannot change. Death and linear time come to mind. If we cannot let go we waste energy on efforts that never succeed. That energy comes from somewhere. We divide our troops and will be fighting on two fronts.

The logic to the serenity prayer defines wisdom as being able to determine what is and is not possible. Everything must therefore not be possible. By definition then, if one never sees the need to let go he cannot be wise, since he never makes the qualifying distinctions. Also, Clausewitz said that cavalry commanders need to know only how to advance. But generals also need to know how to retreat. Living life as a cavalry commander becomes a disaster.

If someone becomes sad in group that assumes priority over everything else save acute emergencies. We have come to call it "the zone", although that term is also used for someone who relives an experience in the telling of it. Years ago we needed to monitor those who tried to take people out of the zone. Today group is much better at letting someone stay with their sadness.

Everyone knows the experience of grief, although it is hard to describe. Some consider it their most dysphoric experience. But it appears to be necessary, like pain. It reminds

us what is important and reflects the process of letting go. We do not let go by making a statement. We let go by allowing the experience of emotional connection attain awareness and recognizing it no longer exists. Just as one cannot experience funny without laughter, one cannot experience loss without sad. It is part of the world, existential—no pain, no gain; no grief, no loss. Loss is not simply a cognitive thing. We all know we are going to die. But getting the pathology report is quite a different thing. Saying goodbye exists on that level.

The inability to grieve causes all sorts of difficulty. In the mental world one cannot swap pleasant for unpleasant, but one can swap one type of unpleasant for another. Most often combat vets swap grief for anger. When they lost a buddy they could avenge or grieve. Military command and the situation favored the former. But life does not. Continued aggression to avoid feeling loss does nothing to resolve the loss. But it does make a demand for continual aggression. Locked into that mode is a common presentation. And little can be done about it if one does not deal with the loss. There is a price for everything. One aphorism important in life is that there is no free lunch. If a person cannot face grief then he will pay some price for doing so. With combat vets that typically involves problems with anger.

Some say they grieve in their own way. They might throw themselves into work or head to the boat. That is not grieving; it is their way of avoiding it. Grief is what it says, a hole in one's heart when you realize something precious is gone forever. Grief is not tears, but neither is it without them. Tears are the external manifestation of the experience. And it is not the thought we are so interested in. Anyone can recognize the loss of a close friend is a loss. But grief is knowing with the heart. No heart, no tears, no grief. We cannot inflate the experience into meaninglessness.

Yet while someone crying takes priority over everything else in group, we do not seek tears. We seek options. If someone feels sad, we want them to feel okay about that. Sad is part of life, not a character flaw. We part with contemporary culture in that respect. But then perhaps group sees life more accurately than contemporary culture. Grief is the process of letting go. It is playing defense. Assertion is the process of fixing (aggression if that fixing means getting rid of something). It is offense. There will be no long term victory in life without both offense and defense. And the serenity prayer says that playing without both is unwise. We have reached the point in group where no one seriously challenges grief as a legitimate reaction. Some even go so far as to rephrase the term "cry like a baby" into "cry like a combat vet." Different, but true.

Tied in with the inability to grieve is the propensity to anger. That is the nemesis of most veterans who attend our group. It is a significant lowering of standards to say that a trip to Home Depot resulting in a police escort warrants being called successful because no one was seriously hurt. That is not good enough. A successful trip to Home Depot is returning home with no flashing lights at all.

Anger presents perhaps the most pressing and common problem in group. It can run the gamut from five to twenty-five years at Potosi to gratuitous insults directed at one's

spouse. Zero to ten in no time flat is necessary for survival in a situation where there is only the quick and the dead. But civilian life typically moves more slowly. Options work better. Being able to respond at a five or a seven is superior to all or nothing. Complex does not usually lead to all or none responses. Combat does; it is life or death. But in civilian life you end up in court negotiating an endless series of grays, and paying both lawyers for the privilege. We do not rely on milk and cookies. Aggression remains an option. At times it is the only one. But it should not be the first. It should be the last and remain subject to a fully deliberated warrant for action. Gratuitous violence is a sprinter in a marathon. He might impress at first, but will ultimately lose.

We find it useful to consider options other than broken windows and lacerations. A lot of time is spent in group recently on that area. But options make sense only in connection to principles. So we are led to philosophy and to thinking through the nature of human relations. Such discussions are driven by logic. They appear to be useful. Concepts of sovereignty, liberty, and personal agency are not intuitive. We seem to gain leverage by considering them. Is this therapy? Well it is useful for effective living. Is it interpreting unconscious defense? No, but how far did exploring the Oedipus complex get in making personal change? We do not lose sight of behavior as possible defense. All the discussion in the world about the nature of effective human relationships will do little if one turns to anger to avoid grief. So grief does not leave us here in our exploration of philosophy. Group should always be alert to our desire to escape the difficult blocking and tackling of life. Life is not a beach. Half of it is letting go of what we gain in the other half. Platitudes do not cover that. And remember,



there is no free lunch. Paying for losses as one goes is better than running a tab. One does not try to run a 10K race without getting in shape.

Empathy is the engine that drives the group. All therapists agree empathy is important but they draw the line on it at different places. Some say the therapist should feel enough to get the general idea and then jump to a rational therapy, i.e. Prozac or anger management. Yalom says

that the answer to the big questions of therapy lie in the verb “to be”. This means that empathy, the person to person connection, is central to therapeutic agency. We think one is either in or out on this issue. Leaving the field when the going gets tough will not inspire confidence in the patient. Empathy is for the whole ride. This means that the veteran will have a companion for the entirety of his experience. Nothing needs to be shut out, and since shutting out is the essence of PTSD the disorder loses traction. Also, the therapist can offer his own associations. Two minds are better than one when seeking possible responses—as long as the minds have the same read, which is what empathy allows. This means that if the other person is crying, the therapist is not taking notes, doesn’t it? (Of course in group, the therapist is not the only person empathizing.)

The “normalization” of grief and the “legitimization” of aggression in the service of principled goals determine perhaps the backbone of our work. That combination might constitute the strategy. There are tactics.

1. We follow the analytic principle of talking about whatever is on one’s mind. We seek emotion in group, not just cognition. Except in flashbacks, Vietnam does not typically present itself at face value. It connects through current activities. One might have a boss who resembles a lieutenant who placed his career above the unit and now react accordingly to the boss. We follow the conscious trail knowing it will lead to something important, rather than parachuting in to where we think we should be. There is little therapy in material void of feeling.

2. We use the group as a practice field for interpersonal experience. This rests on the assumption that we will relate to group members as we relate to others outside group. This is not a cognitive stretch. Looking at group interactions offers two leverage points for insight: the material is now and thus alive, and we can rely on first-hand information rather than second-hand. Also, people check their typical responses at the door. We accept that the information we get by reflecting is worth more than the effect one achieves by responding. The deck is stacked toward personal awareness.

3. Everyone in group shares the same rights and responsibilities. It is an egalitarian society. It also shares aspects of analytic therapy. People are obliged to talk about what is on their minds. They are obliged to report honestly their reactions. Truth is necessary if we are going to gather the information from which to abstract principles. That is what we do. We want to get those principles right. Everyone is a whole person. This includes the leader and any staff or visitors who might attend. There can be no area off limit to reflection. Everything would hide behind it.

4. Picnic talk is what we call simple conversation. Every day discussions need not be limited in value but they are not typically designed to increase personal awareness. The difference between group therapy and social conversation is that normal conversation takes place at face value. It is life lived. Therapy is life for insights. It is also real life, but it has the added factor that one is trying to come away from the interchange with insights that might improve personal effectiveness. The critical difference is that at some point in therapy we reflect on what has transpired. We also do life in group. We have real feelings, interchanges, and connections. And these matter. But also in the mix is the quest to increase our options.

Other issues are not purely tactical. We naturalize guilt and shame. A hard fact of life is that human beings are in large part determined by their situations. We do not float above the field, commanding our actions. We are caught up in them. War reduces everything and everyone to a least common denominator. None of the prisoners of war I saw coming out of Vietnam were able to simply give name, rank, and serial number. Under torture everyone told what they knew. People do things and don’t do things because they try to

stay alive. In group we grade on the curve, not on some preconceived ideal. War is a hard test. Scores are not very high. The problem with war lies with war, not with the soldier.

Pursuant to this is another reality. PTSD is chronic as soon as the bullet leaves the gun. Talking about it two seconds, two hours, or two years later will not alter that reality. One's perspective on life changes in war, inexorably — and we place our bet accordingly. This means that one will not see things the same as those who have not undergone similar experience. One can no longer use that group as a measuring stick. Meanings have changed. Trust has fractured. A new system needs to be constructed. Life can be lived authentically from the position of post-traumatic stress disorder, but the clock cannot be turned back. Truth now has to be verified internally, not borrowed from others down the street. This can be done, but it takes work. We try to do that in group.



Principles and guidelines are important, and we have tried to formulate them over the years. But they only facilitate living. Life is for living, and we did that in group as well. We worked together and formed relationships in the process. Our work may not be forever. But our memories will be. I shall cherish them.

— *Robert Andersen*

