HEALING TRAUMA
STUDY GUIDE

PETER A. LEVINE, PH.D.
# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 1  
Somatic Experiencing .................................................................................................. 2  
Healing Trauma Sensibly ............................................................................................ 2  

WHAT IS TRAUMA? ................................................................. 3  
Trauma and the Individual ......................................................................................... 3  
Stress and Trauma ...................................................................................................... 4  

CAUSES OF TRAUMA ........................................................................ 4  

THE BIOLOGICAL NATURE OF TRAUMA ............................................. 5  

SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA ............................................................. 7  
Specific Symptoms and Their Order of Appearance ................................................. 7  

HEALING AND TRANSFORMATION .................................................. 10  
Renegotiation ............................................................................................................ 10  
The Twelve Elements of Successful Renegotiation ............................................... 11  

EXERCISES ................................................................................................. 12  
Grounding and Centering ........................................................................................... 12  
Grounding with Animals ......................................................................................... 13  
Empowerment/Healthy Aggression ......................................................................... 14  
Push Hands ............................................................................................................... 14  
Back Pushing ........................................................................................................... 15  
Escape/Flight Exercise ............................................................................................. 15  
Containment/Settling—Completing Energy Circuits ............................................... 16  

AWAKENING ................................................................................................. 17  

TRAUMATIC REENACTMENT .......................................................... 17  
Acting Out ............................................................................................................... 18  
Acting In .................................................................................................................. 18  
Societal Trauma ....................................................................................................... 19  

THE SEEDS OF HEALING ........................................................................... 20  

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES .............................................................................. 21
I dedicate this audio learning set to the students of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado; to the parents, families, teachers, friends, and all others who have undergone untold suffering due to the horrific tragedy that occurred on April 20, 1999.

I hold a flickering hope that such devastating events will serve to awaken us to the fact that something has gone terribly wrong with our world, something so insidious that we do not seem to notice it. We Americans, along with most modern societies, have become desensitized to the depths of our predicament.

When our children become violent and self-destructive, they are warning us that our society has become severely out of balance. To respond effectively to this imbalance, we need to understand the intrinsic relationship between trauma and violence. Trauma-related violent behavior is not limited to “acted-out” incidents such as the one at Littleton. More predominant, and equally harmful, is violence turned inward, manifesting itself as anxiety, depression, and illness. A significant percentage of our population suffers from the effects of this “acted-in” violence. It is my sincere belief that we can begin to break this vicious cycle and create a safer, healthier, more peaceful world for us all.

Trauma touches everyone, and it will take all of us working together to heal its invisible, but often debilitating, wounds. Our first, crucial step lies in understanding that these wounds—whether resulting from violence, war, automobile accidents, surgical procedures, or even a simple fall off a bicycle—can be healed.
Somatic Experiencing

Although my scientific training is in medical biophysics and psychology, the key insight that led me to develop my method of healing trauma came from observing animals in the wild. Wild prey animals have an inborn immunity to trauma; otherwise, they could not survive. Since human responses to threat are instinctive, and virtually identical to other mammals', I wondered why—conversely—we are so susceptible to trauma. My work with traumatized people over the past thirty-five years has shown me that our more highly developed rational brains actually prevent the instinctive process from doing its job. Building on this perception, I’ve developed a method called Somatic Experiencing (SE), which offers powerful tools for healing trauma.

SE is not dependent on drugs or other outside agents. Rather, it helps people access their own, instinctive ability to rebound from overwhelming experiences. It can be used to heal past and future traumas—because people can often learn how to prevent trauma before it happens. By following the relatively simple guidelines and exercises on Healing Trauma, you may be able to help yourself, your family, and your friends avoid unnecessary suffering.

Of course, this is not always possible. Accordingly, you will find information throughout this audio learning set to help you identify situations where professional help is necessary. This study guide addresses only one facet of a very complicated subject. If you experience overwhelming distress in working with this material, I strongly urge you to seek competent professional help. For more detailed information about trauma, I suggest that you read my book, Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma, listed together with other excellent books on the subject (see Additional Resources, page 21).

Healing Trauma Sensibly

The techniques you will learn on Healing Trauma have proven helpful—even life-transforming—to many. Of course, these exercises can bring up uncomfortable sensations and feelings. If this is the case, you may want to take a break, then go back to the exercise when you feel ready. These exercises are not a substitute for professional treatment. If your post-traumatic symptoms are severe, or if you find that any of these exercises generate intolerable psychological or physical pain, please stop doing it immediately and consult a qualified medical, psychiatric, or psychological professional. If you are taking prescribed drugs, please do not alter your pharmaceutical routine, except at the direction of the person who prescribed your medications.
WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is perhaps the most avoided, ignored, belittled, denied, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering. Although it is the source of tremendous distress and dysfunction, it is not an ailment or a disease, but the by-product of an instinctively instigated, altered state of consciousness. We enter this altered state—let us call it “survival mode”—when we perceive that our lives are being threatened. If we are overwhelmed by the threat and are unable to successfully defend ourselves, we can become stuck in survival mode. This highly aroused state is designed solely to enable short-term defensive actions; but left untreated over time, it begins to form the symptoms of trauma. These symptoms can invade every aspect of our lives, and are powerful enough to distort the very fabric of our individual, cultural, economic, political, religious, and spiritual aspirations.

Perhaps the most important thing to understand about trauma is that people, especially children, can be overwhelmed by what we usually regard as common, everyday events. Until fairly recently, our understanding of trauma was limited to the experiences of “shell-shocked” soldiers and victims of catastrophic accidents and injuries. However, this narrow view does not encompass the whole truth. Over time, a series of so-called minor mishaps can have the same damaging effect on a person as major traumatic events such as war or rape. In this sense, most of us have experienced trauma, either directly or indirectly.

Trauma and the Individual

No two people experience or manifest trauma in exactly the same way. What is harmful to one person may be exhilarating to another. Many factors are involved in this wide range of response to threat, including an individual’s age, history of trauma, family dynamics, and even genetic makeup. Understanding these differences will keep us from judging each other—an attitude that can seriously impede healing. When we are traumatized, we need support, not judgment.

The vast disparity in individual perceptions and reactions makes it difficult to establish a working definition of what is traumatic. What we do know is that it is not the event itself that is traumatic; it is the individual’s perception of and capacity to respond to the event. If one perceives a situation to be life-threatening, then that situation is potentially traumatic.

Our response to perceived threat can be affected in both obvious and subtle ways. For example, a traumatized war veteran who reacts intensely every time a car backfires is responding in an obvious way. When a person who suffered torture and confinement breaks out in a cold sweat inside a crowded elevator, that is also obvious. However, most of us who have been overwhelmed by a series of more everyday events have responses that are not as easily traced (see Causes of Trauma, page 4).
Stress and Trauma

Recently, trauma has been used as a buzzword to replace stress, as in “I had a traumatic day at work.” This is misleading and trivializing. Certainly, all traumatic events are stressful, but all stressful events are not traumatic. The symptoms of stress can be reversed by removing the causes of stress, and temporarily relieved by techniques such as massage and meditation. Trauma, by contrast, is a fundamental fracture. It is about loss of connection—to ourselves, our families, and the world around us. This loss is often hard to recognize, because it happens slowly, over time. We adapt to these subtle changes; sometimes, without even noticing them. Trauma requires deeper investigation than does stress, and its healing leads to a far more meaningful, long-term transformation.

Psychiatric medicine has chosen to view most long-term effects of trauma as incurable and only marginally controllable by drugs. Yet not only is trauma curable, but the healing process can be a catalyst for profound awakening. Although it is a fact of life, trauma does not have to be a life sentence.

CAUSES OF TRAUMA

Trauma is trauma, no matter what caused it. It is irrelevant whether someone else would find the same event traumatizing. For example, sudden loud noises like thunder or the angry shouts of adults can traumatize infants and young children. Of course, thunder and shouting are rarely life-threatening, but when it comes to trauma, it is the perception of threat that is the critical factor. Under normal circumstances, a car backfiring is not a threat. But to someone who has been traumatized by war, the sound of an out-of-tune automobile can conjure up previous situations that were literally life-threatening.

The causes of trauma can be divided into two main categories:
  • events that are almost always traumatic, no matter who experiences them
  • common, jarring, unexpected events that can be traumatic under certain circumstances

The first category includes the obvious causes of trauma:
  • war
  • severe childhood emotional, physical, or sexual abuse
  • experiencing or witnessing violence
  • rape or assault
  • catastrophic injuries and illnesses
  • loss of a loved one
The second category includes seemingly ordinary events that traumatize more often than we might expect. As you read, notice your own body’s response to the list. Begin bringing awareness to your bodily, “felt” sense of the things you experience. Pay attention to sensations like tingling, muscles tightening or loosening, increased or decreased heart rate, numbness, paralysis, temperature changes, etc. You may see fleeting images; different colors or shapes may appear in your inner field of vision. You may experience thoughts or emotions, or you may have little or no response. Pay attention to the things that occur automatically, that you are usually not conscious of. Try to objectively notice whatever happens, almost as if you were an outside observer. Make a mental note of it and move on.

Here is a list of potentially traumatizing occurrences that may not be so obvious:

- minor automobile accidents (even fender benders), especially those that cause whiplash
- invasive medical and dental procedures, particularly when performed on children who are restrained or anesthetized (the use of ether increases the potential for trauma)—even adults who rationally know that these are helpful may experience certain procedures (like a pelvic exam) as an attack
- falls and other so-called minor injuries, especially when children or elderly people are involved (for example, a child falling off a bicycle)
- natural disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, floods, volcanoes)
- illness, especially with high fever
- accidental poisoning
- abandonment (being left alone), especially for young children and babies
- prolonged immobilization, especially for children (casting, extended splinting, traction)
- exposure to extreme heat or cold (especially for children and babies)
- sudden loud noises (especially for children and babies)
- birth (for both mother and infant)

Remember that this is simply a partial list, intended to give you a rough idea of potentially traumatic events. There are many other similar situations and occurrences that may cause trauma under certain conditions.

**THE BIOLOGICAL NATURE OF TRAUMA**

Human responses to threat are primarily instinctive and biological, and secondarily psychological and cognitive. They comprise three innate action plans: fight, flight, and freeze. These three
responses are common to all mammals. When we sense threat, our bodies and minds enter the first stage of what is called an “arousal cycle.” Our muscles tense, and we begin to search for the source of possible danger. If we locate this source and perceive it to be a real threat, then we enter the second stage. Mobilized, our bodies and minds begin to produce adrenaline and cortisol, the two primary chemicals that energize us to fight or flee. In the third stage, we discharge this energy by completing the appropriate defensive actions (namely, fighting or fleeing). The fourth and final stage ensues when the nervous system, no longer aroused, returns to a state of equilibrium.

If we are overwhelmed by a threat and are unable to fight or flee, we instinctively employ the third action plan, the “freezing response” (also known as the “immobility response” or “playin’ possum”). This defensive maneuver serves two purposes. First, it may fool the attacker into losing interest, allowing us a chance to escape. Second, we will not suffer any pain if we are injured or killed while in this state, because in immobility, consciousness seems to leave the body. (Psychologists call this phenomenon “dissociation.”) But even though we are immobilized, our nervous system is still highly aroused. We have not been able to discharge any of the fight-or-flight energy our body has mobilized—leaving us in a state somewhat like that of a car whose accelerator and brakes are being floored at the same time. It is impossible to complete the arousal cycle when you cannot move.

Animals who survive an attack by using the freezing response simply allow for the biological discharge of excess energy and completion of the arousal cycle. Essentially, they do this after the event by shaking and trembling in a way that restores spontaneous breathing. This instinctive action allows the nervous system to regain its balance. (For a graphic example of this process, watch the National Geographic video, Polar Bear Alert. This video features revealing footage of a polar bear who runs to escape an airplane piloted by a wildlife biologist. The bear is shot with a tranquilizer dart that renders it immobile. After it has been tagged and freed, the bear shakes and convulses all over, and then begins to breathe normally again. To clearly see the completion of the flight response, play the sequence in slow motion. See Additional Resources, page 21.)

Unfortunately, humans have a much harder time completing this process. There are two main reasons for this difficulty. One, the survival energy is so intense that it frightens us, and two, we are uncomfortable with surrendering our conscious control to involuntary (unconscious) sensations. Because of these fears, our rational brains often try to override the completion process. When this happens, the nervous system remains in a state of arousal. Even if the threat is gone, brain and body respond as if it still exists and continue to spew out the fight-or-flight chemicals.

For example, when an adult molester overpowers a child, the youngster’s instinctive survival energies are restrained and overwhelmed. Typically, the child cannot initiate, let alone complete, an escape attempt. The child, just like any organism, grasps for viable means to control the intense, potentially overwhelming energy generated in response to the threat. These different methods of “damage control” become the symptoms of trauma.

Automobile accidents are less obvious, but often equally overwhelming—in part, because things
usually happen too quickly for strategic defensive maneuvers. By design, motor vehicles deter the full discharge of instinctive survival energy. Even if you have a chance to react to the threat of an oncoming vehicle, the most you can do to avoid impact is to turn the wheel. This action may successfully prevent an accident, but your body has already generated enough energy to help you escape a savage, saber-toothed tiger. Instead, all you have done is to swerve out of the path of a shiny Jaguar.

In the same way, many everyday threats—in contrast to threats in the wild—do not allow for adequate discharge of energy. The excess energy, rather than being transformed, becomes bound in the body and mind. The symptoms of trauma are the result. The exercises you will learn on Healing Trauma will teach you how to emulate the natural process wild animals use to release the energy of trauma before it can mutate into painful symptoms.

**SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA**

Trauma is not a disease; it is a state of “dis-ease.” Discomfort is a signal to us that something inside needs our attention. If these signals go unanswered, they eventually evolve into the symptoms of trauma.

Each individual’s experience is unique, so compiling a complete list of every known trauma symptom would be a huge task. However, certain symptoms are considered universal because they are common to most traumatized people. In general, some symptoms tend to appear sooner than others. The lists that follow are not for diagnostic purposes, but rather to help you get a feel for how trauma symptoms behave.

Not all the symptoms listed here are caused exclusively by trauma, of course; nor has everyone who exhibits one or more of these symptoms been traumatized. The flu, for instance, can cause malaise similar to some trauma symptoms. The difference is that the symptoms of flu generally go away in a few days, while those produced by trauma do not.

**Specific Symptoms and Their Order of Appearance**

Typically, the first symptoms to develop after an overwhelming event are:

- **Hyperarousal.** The most common signs are physical—increased heart rate, difficult breathing (rapid, shallow, panting, etc.), cold sweats, tingling, muscular tension—and mental—increase in thoughts, racing thoughts, worry.

- **Constriction.** The nervous system focuses all our resources on the threat by constricting both our bodies and our perceptions. Blood vessels in the skin, extremities, and internal organs constrict to make more blood available to the muscles, which are tensed in preparation for defensive action. Constriction alters breathing, muscle tone, and posture.
• **Dissociation.** Woody Allen said, “I’m not afraid of dying. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” Allen is describing classic dissociation: a separation of awareness from physical reality, which protects us from the impact of escalating arousal. If a life-threatening event continues, dissociation protects us from the pain of death. It is a common means of enduring experiences that are, at the moment, beyond endurance.

• **Denial.** This is a form of dissociation requiring lower levels of energy. In this case the disconnection is between the person and the memory of or feelings about a particular event (or series of events). We may deny that an event occurred, or we may act as though it was unimportant.

• **Feelings of helplessness, immobility, or freezing.** If hyperarousal is the nervous system’s accelerator, immobility is its brake. When both of these states occur at the same time, a feeling of overwhelming helplessness results. This is not the ordinary sense of helplessness that affects all of us from time to time. It is a feeling of being completely immobilized and powerless to act. This is not a perception, belief, or trick of the imagination. It is real. The body feels paralyzed.

The following are other symptoms that tend to surface concurrently with or shortly after trauma (several of them can, however, also show up later).

- hypervigilance (being “on guard” at all times)
- intrusive imagery or “flashbacks”
- extreme sensitivity to light and sound
- hyperactivity, restlessness
- exaggerated emotional and startled reactions to noises, quick movements, etc.
- nightmares and night terrors
- abrupt mood swings (rage reactions, temper tantrums, shame)
- reduced ability to deal with stress (easily and frequently stressed out)
- difficulty sleeping
- fear of going crazy

The next symptoms that may appear include:

- panic attacks, anxiety, and phobias
- mental blankness or spaciness
- avoidance behavior (avoiding certain circumstances that remind us of previous traumas)
- attraction to dangerous situations
• frequent anger or crying (do not take this personally; the person—especially if a child—needs your support)
• abrupt mood swings
• exaggerated or diminished sexual activity
• amnesia and forgetfulness
• inability to love, nurture, or bond with other individuals
• fear of dying or having a shortened life

The final group of symptoms includes those that generally take longer to develop. In most cases, they will have been preceded by some of the earlier symptoms (although, again, there is no fixed rule about when and if a symptom will appear). This group includes:
• excessive shyness
• diminished emotional responses
• inability to make commitments
• chronic fatigue or very low physical energy
• immune system and certain endocrine problems, such as thyroid dysfunction or psychosomatic illnesses—particularly headaches, neck and back problems, asthma, digestive distress, spastic colon, severe premenstrual syndrome, and eating disorders
• depression, feelings of impending doom
• feeling like the “living dead”: detached, alienated, and isolated
• reduced ability to formulate plans and carry them through

The symptoms of trauma can be stable (ever-present) or unstable (come and go) or they may remain hidden for decades. Usually, symptoms do not occur individually but in clusters. They often grow increasingly complex over time, becoming less and less connected with the original trauma experience. This makes it increasingly difficult to trace the symptoms to their cause and easier to deny the importance of the traumatic event in one’s life.

Any or all of the symptoms listed here can appear, regardless of the precipitating event. In every case, our bodies have retained the crucial information that links the symptoms to the original trauma. This is why it is essential that we learn to trust the messages our bodies are giving us. The symptoms of trauma are internal wake-up calls. If we learn how to listen to them, to increase both physical and mental awareness, we can begin to heal our traumas.
HEALING AND TRANSFORMATION

Trauma is healed through the process of discharging excess survival energy. We do this by (a) uncoupling fear from the immobility response, (b) moving out of immobility, and (c) completing the arousal cycle.

Healing trauma can be likened to the process of physical birth. The healing journey drops us into virtual birth canals of consciousness. From these vantage points, we can position ourselves to be propelled into the stream of life. Trauma, like labor, can serve as a final instinctive push—the inner shaking and trembling, or the “kick in the butt” that awakens us to a new life and leads us home.

Transformation looks very different from symptomatic relief. When one successfully heals trauma, a fundamental shift occurs in one’s being as the nervous system regains its capacity for self-regulation.

Scientists have identified three distinct areas of the human brain: the instinctive reptilian brain; the emotional limbic, or mammalian, brain; and the neocortex, or rational brain. As we have already discussed, we often override our reptilian brain. When we transform trauma, however, our instincts, emotions, and intellect work together rather than against one another. This union of our triune brain connects us to the source of our innate vitality. We are freed from the distorted perceptions that keep us from realizing our true potential as human beings.

Fueled by instinctive energy, our emotions lift us up instead of bringing us down. Our perceptions broaden to encompass a receptivity and acceptance of what is, without judgment. Rather than being overwhelmed by our life experiences, we are able to learn from them in a compassionate way. Without trying to forgive, we begin to understand that there is no blame. We acquire a surer sense of ourselves in relation to others and the world around us. Our resilience in the face of threat and stress increases. We experience greater spontaneity, allowing us to relax, enjoy, and live life more fully.

Renegotiation

It is not necessary to relive a trauma in order to process it. In Somatic Experiencing, we “renegotiate” our old traumas. Renegotiation employs elements of the original trauma combined with strengths and resources that were unavailable at the time of the event. Interweaving these missing pieces with the incomplete defensive actions of the trauma creates a new and complete experience. Completion transforms the trauma, strengthening us and building greater resistance to future traumas.
The Twelve Elements of Successful Renegotiation

Every Somatic Experiencing session has certain basic elements. These may appear in different sequences, depending on individual needs and conditions—but overall, the following will give you a sense of what a session looks like.

1. Tracking. In renegotiation, you become mindful of your body sensations, images, behaviors, emotions, and thoughts. Tracking encourages a heightened state of body awareness, allowing you to become conscious of previously hidden instinctual responses. Tracking can be done alone, but since safety is important, it is best undertaken with a therapist, trusted friend, or family member.

2. Activation. The nervous system, muscles, body, and mind are tensed in preparation for defensive action. The brain releases chemicals to provide the necessary energy.

3. Defeat/overwhelm. Feelings of complete helplessness, defeat, and overwhelm constitute the psychological experience of the immobility response. These feelings may arise again as part of reexperiencing some aspects of the original event—however, you will not actually relive the trauma. This would not be helpful; in fact, experiencing defeat/overwhelm again and again can actually be harmful.

4. Resourcing. Your instinctive resources for successful self-defense, overwhelmed in the original event, become available through the tracking process. During the resourcing phase of renegotiation, your therapist or friend (support is critical here) guides you to reclaim these tools.

5. Pendulating. As you become resourced, you will find a natural rhythm that guides you back and forth between the past (unresourced) defeat and the present (resourced) experience, allowing for the formation of a new experience.

6. Grounding and centering. Trauma disconnects people from their bodies. Grounding and centering reconnects you directly with resources naturally available in your own body.

7. Strength and resilience. Grounding and centering also reconnect you to a sense of your strength and resiliency. With this awareness, you are poised for successful defensive action.

8. Natural aggression. When you are free to recognize and allow your instinctive responses, you know when fighting is an appropriate response to a threat—and can discharge the activated energy by following through.

9. Running. Likewise, you will know instinctively when the right response is to run, and can discharge energy as appropriate by doing so.

10. Uncoupling. Undischarged energy intensifies fear and couples it with immobility. Discharging this energy uncouples fear from immobility, allowing you to move beyond trauma and toward transformation.
11. **Orientation.** After you emerge from immobility, your therapist/guide will help you reorient yourself to a world that often appears quite different from before.

12. **Completion.** Completing the cycle discharges the energy that had been fueling the symptoms of trauma. Now your symptoms are free to diminish in strength and frequency, or even to disappear altogether.

**EXERCISES**

You can use the following exercises to help deal with overwhelm. Please note that they are not meant to replace therapy. Use them as additional techniques to support a deeper investigation and resolution of trauma symptoms.

Trauma is the result of the most powerful drives the human body can produce. It demands respect—so please take these exercises slowly and easily. By moving quickly or superficially, you may not hurt yourself, but you will not get the same benefit that you will if you take your time. If at any time an exercise seems disturbing, stop and let things settle. Sit with your experience and see what unfolds. Body sensations, rather than intense emotion, hold the key to healing trauma. Be aware of any emotional reactions welling up inside you and of how your body is experiencing these emotions in the form of sensations and thoughts. If your emotions feel too intense (e.g., rage, terror, profound helplessness, etc.), you may need to enlist competent professional help. Please do seek help and support throughout your journey beyond trauma.

**Grounding and Centering**

In trauma, people lose their ground, so an important part of healing is learning to reestablish ground. Grounding and centering before you begin any of the exercises on *Healing Trauma* will help to create a feeling of safety: a sense that you cannot so easily be knocked off balance by your emotions or sensations.

Stand and feel your feet on the ground. Notice the springiness in your legs. Feel the way your feet contact the ground, almost like suction cups. With your feet firmly planted, sway slowly from the ankles, first from side to side, and then forward and backward. This will help you locate your center of gravity, in the upper pelvic area. Place your hands on your lower belly and sense your center of gravity. It may be helpful to continue swaying gently while doing this (see Figs. A1 and A2).

Now sit in a chair with your feet on the ground or the floor (it does not matter if you are twenty stories up). Place your hands on your lower belly and sense the energy coming into that area through your feet.
Grounding with Animals

Animals are instinctively grounded. Dogs and cats are excellent “grounders,” so are horses and other farm animals. You can use them to show you this connection with the earth.

Place your hand on the animal in a way that is comfortable for both of you—or you may want to lay your head on its chest if that feels right (see Fig. B2).

Notice the calmness in the animal. Listen to its heartbeat and feel its breathing. Feel yourself settle in.
Empowerment/Healthy Aggression

The following exercises help establish feelings of healthy aggression and empowerment. Practicing in this way creates a positive channel for emotions that might surface. As with all the exercises, do these after you are centered and grounded.

*Push Hands*

This technique requires two people: the pusher and the “pushee.” Place the palm of your hand comfortably against the palm of your partner’s hand. If you are the pusher, begin to feel strength and force arising from your center. Start slowly exerting pressure on the pushee. Push as far as you like, while keeping your balance.

The pushee’s job is simply to be there and to provide the resistance necessary to meet the pressure by mirroring the pusher’s strength. Some eye contact is beneficial, but too much can be overwhelming. If you sense that the pusher is collapsing or backing off, reduce eye contact until you feel they have regained their strength. Decrease resistance slightly from time to time to determine if the pusher is maintaining his or her balance.

*Fig. C1*

*Fig. C2*
**Back Pushing**

Start with your backs up against one another’s while maintaining the feeling of being grounded (see Fig. D). Feel the inner support in your upper and lower back. If you experience some gentle shaking and trembling while sinking into this support, just allow it to happen. Take all the time you need. Then slowly begin to push. As in the first exercise, the pusher determines the amount of force while the pushee offers matching resistance. Feel the power coming from your legs and center.

**Escape/Flight Exercise**

Sit in a comfortable chair with a sturdy foam pillow under your feet, and ground yourself. Close your eyes and imagine that a fierce baboon is chasing you. Feel the strength in your legs as you make running movements on the pillow. Remain mindful of your legs and body as you do this. Run until you reach a safe place on top of a large boulder. You have escaped. The baboon loses interest and wanders away. Sit on the warm rock and allow yourself to settle. Notice your breathing and heartbeat. If you begin to shake and tremble, allow it to happen.
Containment/Settling—Completing Energy Circuits

(from traditional Jin Shin techniques, suggested by Stephanie Mines, Ph.D.)

This series of postures helps you to calm down after being aroused. Complete the grounding exercise, then follow the sequence pictured. After each pose, allow time for settling. Notice any changes in your heartbeat and breathing. If you experience shaking or trembling, allow it to happen.

Fig. F1: Take some time to settle into your body and the chair.

Fig. F2: Put your right hand under the left armpit by the heart.

Fig. F3: Then place the left hand over the right upper arm and shoulder. Maintain this position, and feel how you are gently holding your being.

Fig. F4: Next, place the left hand on the heart and right hand on the forehead. Allow energy to flow freely between these two points and all throughout your body.

Fig. F5: Placing the right hand on the belly, again allow the energy to flow freely.
AWAKENING

Several Buddhist and Taoist traditions describe four paths to awakening: sexual ecstasy, meditation, death, and trauma. These are the ultimate catalysts for profound surrender and awakening. Unfortunately, most of us are not prepared to receive the opportunities offered by these powerful teachers.

Though many of us have experienced glimpses of sexual ecstasy, our focus on titillation, seduction, and performance often obscures the possibility for deep emotional and spiritual surrender. Achieving “ego-death” through meditation requires years of dedication; very few people have attained this ultimate accomplishment of meditative discipline. The process of dying, a final chance to make peace with ourselves, has been given over largely to doctors, drugs, and machines. Even in supportive and conscious settings, the act of spiritual surrender is often overshadowed by remorse over having waited until the end of life to accomplish it.

Trauma is the fourth pathway to awakening. In transforming trauma, we face an uncertain world. We must enter a reality stripped of the illusion of safety and learn an entirely new way of being, like a newborn child. In this new world, our instinctive energies are not limited to acts of flight or uncontrolled violence. Rather, they are our heroic energies—the wellspring of our creative, artistic, and poetic sensibilities. We can summon these instinctive forces to propel us into the wholeness of our intelligence.

Trauma is about thwarted instincts. Instincts, by definition, are always in the present. When we allow them their rightful domain, we surrender to the “eternal now.” With mutual presence of mind and body, we can gain access to the source of our own energy and vitality.

TRAUMATIC REENACTMENT

As we have seen, exposure to trauma generates immense amounts of instinctive energy. The inability to discharge this energy leads to an ardent desire for completion: an opportunity to release the trapped power of the fight-or-flight reflex. Our culture offers little understanding of this phenomenon and few avenues for healthy resolution. Consequently, many of us compulsively recreate situations that arouse us in the same ways as the trauma did originally—unconsciously hoping that this time, we will be able to complete the process.

The urge to resolve trauma through reenactment can be severe and compulsive. We are inextricably drawn into situations that replicate the original trauma in both obvious and covert ways. The prostitute with a history of childhood sexual abuse, the ex-combat soldier who joins a police SWAT team, the accident-prone person, and the repeated victim of abusive relationships are common examples of this phenomenon.
In general, we reenact our trauma in two ways. The first, acting out, is the result of externalizing our feelings of violation by committing violence on others. The second, which I call “acting in,” is much more predominant in our culture. Here, people become their own victims as they try to contain the feelings of violation brought about by their traumas. The huge and growing market for antianxiety and antidepressant medications is a societal symptom of widespread acting in.

**Acting Out**

Does violent reenactment result in completion and resolve the trauma? The answer is almost certainly no. If that were the case, people who act out violently would not need to make repeated attempts to discharge, as they typically do. Instead, after one violent act, most people’s nervous systems would normalize and they would go on with their lives.

Acting out violently may provide temporary relief and a false feeling of victory and pride, but without biological discharge, there is no completion. Instead, the cycle of shame and violence recurs. The nervous system remains highly activated, compelling people to seek the only relief they know: more violence. The traumatized person continues to behave as if the traumatic event is still happening—because biologically speaking, it is.

Why is reenactment unable to completely discharge survival energy? The answer, simply stated, is system overload. The inability to discharge this very powerful biological energy puts both the emotional and intellectual portions of the brain in a position they are not adapted to handle. Overwhelmed with undischarged energy, the emotional and rational brains focus on finding an external threat to explain the nervous system’s intense activation. The emotional brain responds by translating instinctive energy into emotions (anger, rage, and shame). This leads to fearfulness and confusion. The rational brain explains the resulting distress by creating an idea: revenge, justice, “nobody cares,” “everyone is out to get me,” etc. It begins to randomly blame external “enemies.” This hypervigilant search for the threat sets the stage for violent reenactment, trampling opportunities for the renegotiation that can bring real healing.

**Acting In**

The vast majority of traumatized people act in: they turn their terror, rage, and shame inwards, where it systematically undermines their health and well-being. Doctors estimate that they can find nothing medically wrong with at least eighty percent of patients who seek their help. A significant portion of these people are probably suffering from undiagnosed symptoms related to trauma and stress.
Our culture prefers that we commit violence on ourselves rather than on others. Without violent acting out, it is easier to maintain a social structure that appears to be in control of itself. What is more, inner violence is easier to deny. We can pretend that we have not internalized the effects of damaging events, significantly compromising our ability to function. Where there is no conscious awareness, there is also no need for personal or social responsibility.

Substantial emotional and social support is becoming increasingly available as our society’s understanding of trauma grows more sophisticated. Still, denial and the need to feel in control mean that we rarely get the help we need immediately following a potentially traumatic incident. This is the critical time when we can most easily discharge the intense energy mobilized to defend ourselves—by literally shaking and trembling through the immobility, shame, and rage. Sadly, many people regard this behavior as frightening or inappropriate, and try to stop it rather than giving themselves (or us) crucially needed support. The result is eventual reenactment and its terrible impact on our society. Arguably, the quadrupling of teenage suicide and depression since World War II exemplifies our failure in this regard.

**Societal Trauma**

Humanity is a violent species, and the twentieth century has, I believe, been the most violent in our history. We live in a world where not only individuals, but entire cultures and nations, act out violently. Much of this societal violence is directly related to traumatic reenactment, some spanning many generations.

Where external threat is an everyday reality—in war zones or inner cities, for example—the combination of undischarged internal survival responses, poverty, and a life-threatening environment creates an explosive situation that is both tragic and self-perpetuating. Urban and rural gangs, cults, and militias all have their roots in instinctual survival behavior. Without the tools for renegotiation, such groups can only withdraw from society and/or act out violently. Large social groups are even more susceptible than individuals to violent, irrational behavior, thanks to the synergistic effects of intense feelings, tribal conflicts, ethnic and religious differences, and threats to national interests.

Yet societal trauma is not limited to war-torn areas or inner cities. It exists all around us and affects us all, especially our children. Trauma disconnects us from both ourselves and the world around us. We cannot feel connected to one another if we are not connected to ourselves—and when we feel disconnected from others, we are more apt to be violent. In a state of disconnection, it is easier to externalize the “other,” to blame them for our unresolved post-traumatic distress, and to dissociate from any pain we cause them. The fruits of this widespread personal and social alienation are especially evident in the United States, which has the highest rate of domestic/peacetime violence in the world. In 1996, nearly ten thousand people were murdered in this country. In that same year, fewer than one hundred murders were reported in Japan, Germany, and England combined.
THE SEEDS OF HEALING

What can we do to address global alienation and its destructive repercussions? We must begin by learning to heal and renegotiate our individual traumas. From there, we can adapt the individual healing/renegotiation process to work in diverse communities, cultures, and nations. This is a daunting task, yet I believe that it can be accomplished.

First, we can help people reestablish connection at the basic level of parent/infant bonding. We know that this bond is ground zero for the healing and prevention of trauma, individual and collective. When adults are stressed or traumatized, their babies and infants react to the disturbance. It is possible to resolve some of the effects of such “inherited” trauma by using rhythmic movements, music, and group interaction to restore broken connections and equilibrium. Work is already underway—in the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, and violent inner-city areas throughout the world—to create models of healthy parent/infant bonding that can be adapted to different cultures and situations (see *Waking the Tiger*—Additional Resources, page 21).

This, of course, is only the beginning. I am convinced that we, as a species, have the natural capacity to heal trauma—and beyond that, to use our traumatic experiences to reconnect with our instincts. Bringing our instinctive, emotional, and rational brains into alignment will transform us as individuals, inevitably leading to much wider-scale global transformation. As whole and connected beings, we can realistically contemplate the creation of a personally fulfilling and relatively peaceful world.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


PETER A. LEVINE, PH.D.

... received his Ph.D. in medical and biological physics from the University of California at Berkeley, and also holds a doctorate in psychology from International University. During his 35-year study of stress and trauma, he has contributed to many scientific and medical publications and served as consultant for NASA’s space shuttle project. He has taught at the Hopi Guidance Center and at hospitals, trauma centers, and pain clinics throughout the world. He is the author of Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma and Healing Trauma: Restoring the Wisdom of Your Body.