

# **Transforming Trauma Stored in the Body: A Holistic Approach to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**

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Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has a significant effect on the lives of many, but because it's not visibly debilitating it is often overlooked. The purpose of this paper is to provide a more comprehensive look at the causes of PTSD and the ways that it manifests in people's bodies. It is also a platform to briefly overview supportive strategies, healing practices and herbal therapeutics.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a reaction to one or more traumatic events which presents anywhere between one month and a year after the occurrence. People experience trauma in situations that are emotionally and physically painful and distressing, and which overwhelm their ability to cope. Trauma may begin as acute stress from a perceived life-threat or as the end product of cumulative stress [1]. Trauma can stem from childhood abuse and neglect, medical/surgical interventions, war and violence, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, accidents and natural disasters, grief, or witnessing acts of violence [2]. To be diagnosed with PTSD, one must exhibit symptoms from three categories: re-experiencing, hyper-arousal, and avoidance [3].

Symptoms of PTSD may include catatonia (speechlessness), black-outs (memory loss), robotic actions, flashbacks (remembering when you don't expect to), sleeplessness, irritability, quickness to anger, listlessness, hopelessness, purposelessness, defeatism, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, nightmares, bad dreams, and disassociation [4]. Drug and alcohol abuse are often present. Risk factors for PTSD include: experiencing dangerous events or traumas, having a history of mental illness, getting hurt, seeing people hurt or killed, feeling horror, experiencing helplessness or extreme fear, having little or no social support after the event or dealing with extra stress after the event such as loss of a loved one, pain and injury, or loss of a job/ home [4].

## **Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal Axis**

During a traumatic event the individual should mount a "fight, flight, or freeze" response. If the person's body is unable to fully process the stressor and release the shock of the event, it gets stored in the cerebral cortex and muscle memory [5]. The stress during the traumatic event, as well as ensuing stress, activates the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal axis, which leads to the suppression of DHEA, testosterone and estrogen synthesis, all of which affect mood. Low estrogen is associated with lower serotonin production, which can impact anxiety. While the Acute Stress Response is necessary for survival, prolonged stress is ultimately damaging. Allostatic load is a term for wear and tear on the body that accumulates when an individual is exposed to repeated or chronic stress. A high allostatic load can result in long-term physiological changes such as atherosclerosis and stroke. A high allostatic load can cause insomnia, depression, and diabetes due to disruption of endocrine function [5, 6].

Chronic stress can cause prolonged elevated levels of Corticotropin Releasing Factor (CRF), a peptide hormone and neurotransmitter. This may down-regulate CRF receptors in the pituitary and brain. Decreased adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH) response and decreased CRF receptor concentrations are found in the frontal cortex of depressed individuals who commit suicide, as well as in people suffering from PTSD [7].

Traumatic events can be replayed and re-experienced months to years after the event. Fear-related memories are stored in the cerebral cortex, and when triggered, may also activate neural circuits in the temporal lobe and brain stem, potentiating feelings of panic [6]. Panic, stress and

emotional distress are perceived by the hypothalamus, which regulates hunger, thirst, sleep and wakefulness, as well as most involuntary mechanisms, including body temperature. When these signals are disturbed, the body is confused about how to regulate itself [8]. This can contribute to the symptoms of PTSD and exacerbate self-destructive patterns.

## **Historical Trauma**

Beyond the acute presentations of trauma, there are social, political and spiritual contexts that engender ongoing trauma. Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart defines historical trauma as:

“Cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma. Native Americans have, for over 500 years, endured physical, emotional, social, and spiritual genocide from European and American colonialist policy. The effects of historical trauma include: unsettled emotional trauma, depression, high mortality rates, high rates of alcohol abuse, significant problems of child abuse and domestic violence.” [9]

It's hard to heal from trauma when the conditions that created it haven't changed. Repeated ongoing traumatic events such as genocide, residential schools, slavery, war, displacement, repeated sexual, emotional and physical abuse, environmental destruction are not only held in an individual's body, but can be carried over to one's descendants [10]. Although healing from trauma is important for the individual, often a community healing process is required. When a person lives in isolation, and is displaced from their community or landbase and home, it's a harder and longer journey towards healing [9].

In Judith Lewis's book "Trauma and Recovery", she says that, "recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor" [11]. There is a lot to be said about the incredible strength and resilience of people who have endured so much. Major factors that encourage healing are support from one's community, positive feelings towards oneself and healthy coping mechanisms like physical exercise and ritual [12].

## **Therapeutic Practices for PTSD**

Therapeutic protocols depend on a person's symptoms, experiences, and constitution. People have found success with alternative therapies such as cranial sacral therapy, acupuncture, and Somatic Experiencing. Other therapies include Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), hypnosis, and Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) [3].

Somatic Experiencing is a psychobiological method for resolving trauma symptoms and relieving chronic stress. This modality offers a framework to assess where a person is "stuck" in the fight, flight, freeze, or collapse responses, and provides clinical tools to resolve these fixed physiological states.

Acupuncture can be a huge support in being able to cope with trauma and heal from PTSD. When giving treatments for PTSD, acupuncturist Janette Cormier uses North American Detox Acupuncture (NADA) as a basic protocol, combined with specific points for the individual. She also does "grounding" treatments and often sees Kidney Yang deficiency. In the framework of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Kidney issues are related to fear [13].

Psychotherapy is also used as a healing modality for PTSD. However, according to the anti-child abuse group Generation Five, the pure mental health focus "often individualizes the experience,

leaving people isolated with the impact and the concrete circumstances of their specific situation” [10].

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a therapy in which a person moves their eyes rapidly from side to side while recalling a traumatic event. EMDR is sometimes recommended by allopathic medical doctors as an effective treatment.

Biofeedback is a therapy to help clients understand how their bodies react to stress. It involves using a machine, at first, to indicate bodily functions that are normally unconscious and involuntary, like heart rate and temperature. The purpose is to learn to control these reactions, and eventually be able to manage reactions to stress without using a machine.

Hypnosis induces a deep state of relaxation, which may help people with PTSD feel safer and less anxious, decrease intrusive thoughts, and become involved in daily activities again. Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) helps a person revisit traumatic events while tapping on acupuncture points in order to release the experience [8].

Many cultures have longstanding methods of healing what some now call PTSD. Ceremony encourages spiritual nourishment and release of a traumatic event, especially ceremony that incorporates shaking and crying. Traditional ceremonial practices find a corollary in some recently developed trauma therapies. In Peter Levine’s Book “Waking the Tiger” he describes that, when responding to an inescapable or overwhelming threat, humans and animals both use an immobility (or “freeze”) response. Levine suggests that humans should mirror the fluid stress adaptations of wild animals, by physically resolving the immobility response after a stressor is removed. He observed animals shaking violently after a life-threatening encounter, then returning to apparently normal behavior. Using these findings, he developed the Somatic Experiencing techniques mentioned above [14].

To begin the journey to healing a person must be able to look at their trauma and be ready to transform it. Clinical herbalist and acupuncturist Jeanette Cormier explains,

“One of the most difficult things about healing from PTSD is that you need to gently but firmly push people forward out of victimization. This can be really challenging for the practitioner and the patient and must be done with care and integrity. There is also a timing issue regarding a sort of grieving period. Obviously it is not enough, or totally inappropriate, to tell people they must “get over it,” but within the context of treatment and support this is still the ultimate goal - that they leave victimhood behind for a life of freedom from their past demons - whether they be people or experiences. In order for people to move forward in this way they need to be strong, and I often find myself working on strengthening their vitality and spirit, working on their constitution, nourishing them and encouraging them always to move forward and not to stagnate. Ceremony can be huge for this. I feel like acupuncture treatments are like a personal ceremony when done appropriately... and can be massively profound at times” [13].

### **Herbal Therapeutics for PTSD**

Herbal medicine is only one of multiple supportive strategies needed when approaching PTSD. When addressing PTSD it is important support the person’s endocrine function and nervous system and help with adaptation to stress.

From the perspective of Traditional Chinese Medicine, PTSD can be seen as Shen disturbance or insufficient/ blocked Qi. In that case it may be useful to move or build the Blood [11].

Addressing acute anxiety and depression can also be useful in improving quality of life. The lasting effects of PTSD can result in permanent physiological changes such as chronic pain and illness [6, 8, 15]. In this case one will want to support a person's body by modulating the immune system and supporting neuroendocrine function. With acute symptoms of PTSD such as insomnia, anxiety and panic it may be prudent to address physical pain and emotional turmoil. However, suppressing these symptoms over the long term may potentiate the problem. Sedating someone does not address the underlying question of why the trauma is unresolved [16]. Herbal actions may include nervines, adaptogens, blood builders and movers, anxiolytics, immunomodulants and yin tonics. Herbal protocols differ for each person depending on their constitution, symptoms, barriers to healing, and lifestyle.

Milky Oats (*Avena sativa*) is a restorative nervine for self-induced adrenal exhaustion. The milky tops are used internally as tea or fresh tincture. The fresh tincture is used for acute nerve injury. More affective when taken sooner after injury, Milky Oats preparation is specifically indicated for concussion, compressed nerves, cut nerves and traumatic brain injury. Helpful in recovery from neurasthenia/chronic fatigue syndrome, insomnia, depression, anxiety, and opiate withdrawal, this herb restores a person's resources and rebuilds and regenerates nerves.

Dose: 3-5 ml 3 times a day for traumatic acute nerve injury recovery, especially brain injury. Lower doses are employed for other maladies. Tea: 6 tbs in a quart of boiled water, preferably infused overnight [17].

Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) nourishes and calms the heart, helping to settle the Shen. Figuratively, her thorns offer protection from those who would harm you. Hawthorn can potentiate digitalis drugs, and caution should be employed if used with beta-blockers.

Dose: solid extract jam; 1 tsp, 3 times a day [18].

Wood Betony (*Stachys officinalis*) is used for harmonizing the interaction of the gut with the brain, increasing parasympathetic tone, reducing, headaches and for aiding digestion in the presence of stress. It's seen as specifically indicated for grounding through the solar plexis, people who are stuck in negative mental patterns, protection from evil spirits, nightmares, and visions.

Dose: 1 teaspoon, 3 times a day [19].

*Anemone pulsatilla* is used for underlying anxiety, people who are sad, pale, withdrawn, and who need sleep. Michael Moore writes of its usefulness for "people who have everything bad happening to them, who are fearful and weep easily, when everything that can go wrong has." It is specifically used for panic attacks, insomnia, nervousness, and a generally agitated emotional state with gloom and distress.

Dose: 3-10 drops, up to 4 times a day. Anemone is a low-dose botanical, and should be used with care, ideally under the supervision of an experienced herbalist [2, 20].

Dan Shen (*Salvia miltiorrhiza*) is used in TCM. It brings courage to the heart during disturbance and fright. It is specific in cases of insomnia and dementia, nourishes Blood while moving the Blood and has calming effects. It is a Blood tonic, mild analgesic for pain from stagnation, and moves energy in the body.

Dose: 3-15 g or 4-3 ml, 1-4 times daily [17].

Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*) is indicated for the "wired and tired" person. It helps in re-regulating the HPA axis and helping shift a person's perception of stress, and in cognitive decline. It is a Yin tonic and is anabolic, helping a person to store energy rather than use it.

Dose: 2-4 ml three times a day [21].

Skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*) is a calming nervine for depression or anxiety, restless leg syndrome, muscle spasms and obsessive compulsive behavior. It is also for people who feel tired and wired. The Eclectics used it for irritability of the nervous system and restlessness.

Dose: 10g of herb per day. For tincture: 1-5 ml 3 times a day [17].

Frankincense (*Boswellia sacra*) is warm and pungent, and enters the Heart and Lung meridians. It promotes Blood circulation and movement of Qi, and is used following acute physical trauma. It can also relax tendons. Frankincense is especially suitable for conditions where the joints and muscles are very stiff, swollen, and painful [18].

Mimosa (*Albizia julibrissin*) bark and blossoms are also used for disturbed Shen. The blossoms are more calming than the bark. In Chinese tradition, bad dreams, irritability, anger, depression, and poor memory are symptoms of disturbed Shen. Combined with Hawthorn berries and Rose petals the bark is used for broken heartedness, grief and deep sadness. Mimosa blossoms (He Huan Hua) also can be used to calm the Shen and elevate mood, but they are weaker and less effective than the bark [22, 19].

Dose: Tincture 40-80 drops 3 times a day [22].

Passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*) is a mild anodyne, anxiolytic, hypnotic and nervine, antispasmodic and hypotensive. It's specifically used for circular thinking and people who can't relax or sleep because mind is going around and around. Passionflower is an antispasmodic relaxant and is a warmer alternative to Blue Vervain. It's good for anxiety, irritability, restlessness, stress induced spasm, backache, tension headache, bruxism (grinding teeth), disturbed Shen, convulsions, stress-induced heart symptoms, nerve pain, exhaustion with spasm and twitch, insomnia, restless sleep, sleeplessness from anxious irritability and worry. It combines well with Jamaican dogwood for sleeplessness with pain.

Dose: Fresh plant tincture 3-6 mls 3 times a day. For sleep 5 ml at bedtime. Tea: 1-2 tsp in 8 oz hot water, steeped up to 30 minutes [23].

*Rosa rugosa* petals are used for grief. Rose is used to astringe and protect the boundaries of the heart. It can help people who feel disempowered to feel more empowered. The combination of Mimosa, Hawthorn and Rose can help people to feel more deeply, and help deal with unresolved issue [16, 17].

Dose: The petals are tinctured in 50% ETOH, 40% water, and 10% glycerin.

For astringency and anti-inflammatory effects: 3-5 ml.

For emotional effects: 1-2 ml a day.

Hips in syrup/jam: 1-2 TBS a day.

Hip tea: 2-5 grams [17].

Ghost Pipe (*Monotropa uniflora*) is used as a nervine to relieve symptoms of neurological chemistry disruption and pain, to stop seizures, convulsions, insomnia, mental disorders, and chronic muscle spasms. Sean Donahue says that Ghost Pipe is specific for: overwhelming physical pain when combined with anodyne herbs, migraines associated with traumatic brain injury, anxiety and panic associated with emotional or sensory overload, triggering of emotional memories that make someone feel "beside herself, with unpleasantly intense mind-altering experiences."

Caution: consumption of 15 ml or more of *Monotropa* tincture can bring deep sleep and ultra-vivid dreams, often bizarre, frequently erotic [24, 25].

Dose: start with three drops of the tincture, but go up to 1ml if the person doesn't respond to a 3 drop dose. In cases of severe panic/agitation give 1ml drop doses at 5 minute intervals [24].

American Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*) is an endocrine amphoteric and adaptogen that is useful for mild to moderate depletion of the HPA axis and adrenal glands. Because of its effects on the HPA axis, it can help correct dysfunction of the immune system, including depletion that leads to a person constantly catching colds. It's also a mood regulator, good for regulating blood sugar in recovering junkies, chronic fatigue syndrome and helping to regenerate the body in people with long term amphetamine use.

Dose: Do not use longer than 3 months, 50-80 drops 3 times a day [17].

Holy Basil (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*) is an adaptogen and helps re regulate a person's perception of stress in HPA dysregulation. It is also used specifically in eating disorders, which are a common occurrence in PTSD because of the disassociation and body dysmorphia that may occur.

Dose: Whole plant juice 1-3 ml 3 times a day, Tincture 3-5 ml in a formula 3 times a day, Tea 2-5 g daily [26].

Reishi (*Ganoderma lucidum*) is useful for women who have hyperimmunity (immune system hyper vigilant; see everything outside of itself as a threat) or who are the caregiving type who are more prone to fibromyalgia. It is used for disturbed Shen, anxiety, insomnia, bad dreams, and listlessness.

Dose: 1:2 ml 2 stage extract 5ml two times a day, 2 teaspoons of powder 2-4 times a day, 7 to 10g in decoction daily [27].

Flower essences help deal with emotional and spiritual trauma. Some flower essences that clinical herbalist Jasmyn Clift recommended for PTSD are:

Star of Bethlehem for shock and trauma. It comes with work. People will need a coping mechanism because they will revisit the trauma to move through it. They need to be up for the work. If they're going through "crazy" times they shouldn't take it. It is ideally to help work with and transform triggers [28, 29].

Mimulus helps a person get over the fear that they know. It is for the person who is shy and retiring and prone to hide their anxiety. For the person who is deterred by chronic fears such as fear of the dark, injury, poverty etc. [28, 29].

Aspen for when you can't explain the fear sympathetic state and worry. For the person with unexplainable fear, who has fears by day or night with no known reason, and fear accompanied by trembling and sweating [28, 29].

Rock Rose is for complete and utter terror and extreme fear caused by facing an unexpected or unfamiliar experience. It is for the person who experiences fear from terrifying sights or nightmares. When their fear and panic is so severe it is projected in the atmosphere. Rock Rose enables a person to be calm, courageous and be able to look out for the well-being of others [28, 29].

Gentian is for people who are starting to lose faith in ones-self. It is for people who attract negativity because of their negative state of mind and are experiencing a deep depression because of a known cause. Gentian aids a person to find a little bit more faith in their own resources [28, 29].

Gorse is for people with no self- sufficiency who are living with chronic illness and/or in poverty. For people with diminished vision, lack of ambition and interest due to hopelessness. Gorse helps a person realize and have faith in their visions, be able to overcome obstacles and not be overly influenced by others [28, 29].

Clematis is for people who cope by disassociating. They are day dreamers that indulge themselves in drugs and alcohol, TV and other distractions. Clematis helps person live in the present and complete tasks, especially for people with ADD and PTSD [28].

Honeysuckle is for people living in the past who can't be present specifically in cases of PTSD. Honeysuckle is for the people who dwell on thoughts of the past and hold a pessimistic outlook both for the present and future. For the people who are chronically nostalgic and regretful. Honeysuckle helps people not dwell on past experiences and be able to creatively transform trauma and grow from it [28, 29].

Olive is for people who are totally exhausted to the point of tears, drained of energy and can't do daily tasks. It helps people find motivation, depend on their inner-self and attract happiness and pleasure despite their exhaustion [28, 29].

Pine is for people who have immense guilt and self-reproach. This is a common occurrence in PTSD because people internalize their trauma and blame themselves for it. Pine is for people who over work themselves and stress out because they are never good enough. Pine helps resolve remorse and enable people live without useless guilt [28, 29].

Bach Rescue Remedy is for acute trauma situations to help calm and ground a person in times of panic and anxiety [28].

Other flower essences that may be useful in PTSD are: Indian pink for remaining centered and focused even under stress. Bleeding heart in a spirit dose of the whole is for mass hysteria.

Eating the flower of borage will enhance courage [12].

Red clover is used to create a calm and steady presence [12].

Yarrow is useful for boundaries psychic protection [12].

Sunflower is for people who have relationship issues their father. It also helps a person express themselves fully, truly and vibrantly [12].

Additional nutritional and supplementation support may include: Omega 3 fatty acids for supporting mood. Eating kale and other leafy greens are high in magnesium and reduce spasm. Co-Q10 and magnesium support immune and muscular support. It is good to avoid coffee and other stimulants and recommended to look into other food sensitivities [30].

In conclusion, herbs are just one of the supportive strategies needed in the journey towards healing from PTSD. The process of healing is going to look very different for each person. Healing is most effective when done within community; the more supported a person is the quicker and more likely it is for transformation to occur. Displacement and isolation hinder the healing process. Ideally, a person would receive multiple forms of care. Trauma is usually not a singular occurrence and traumatic events may be unavoidable. When addressing PTSD, it is important not to just look at it as an individual issue, but to look at the larger issues and context of why the trauma is occurring.

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