



nothing but the truth

Helen Oakwater is an experienced adoptive parent, coach, trainer, speaker and author.

DON'T worry. He wasn't abused, just neglected." That's a phrase heard far too often by prospective and existing adopters.

Dr Bessel Van Der Kolk's new book repeats his catchphrase "the body keeps the score". We know an infant's brain wires differently when exposed to trauma (i.e. an overwhelming affect or belief you might die), yet there has been less recognition of how trauma is stored within the body and how it can be melted.

sensory triggers

Imagine infant Tim lying in a cot without human contact for over 24 hours which happens regularly when his mother is on one of her frequent drinking binges.

This combination of sensory experiences is stored within the implicit memory, inaccessible with words. Metaphorically, I think of it as embedded shrapnel. Pause and consider what beliefs might Tim have formed about himself? Unimportant, toxic, disgusting? Reflect on the emotions. Fury, grief, fear?

Fast forward and Tim is adopted by a delightful family, who know Tim had a tough time before placement, but lack much of the detail. However, it's inconceivable he could ever feel neglected with them. Or is it? This particular episode of neglect is a cohort of specific physiological sensations; metaphorically a triangular piece of opaque green glass. Might it be replicated at a later date? Sadly, yes. Unlike other children it is not one small page in their life story - it's the whole book.

Fast forward again. It's a cold November evening. Fifteen-year-old Tim spent his lunch money on cigarettes, lost his bus pass and has walked home in the rain. After he opens the front door it crashes behind him and the hall light blows. From the kitchen his Mum calls "Hi, Tim".

He responds by screaming abuse at her. Why?

trauma-triggered behaviour

Pause for a minute and consider Tim's sensory experience at precisely that moment. He has cold wet feet. His empty tummy is grumbling. It's dark. There was a sudden loud crash.

Compare this to the picture of the neglected child, wet, cold and alone in his cot. The sensory experience is a close match. Plus, his hand has flown to his face, where the vibrant acne beneath his fingers echoes the texture of nappy rash.

This combination of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic cues triggers an implicit memory and resonates with the 'glass shrapnel'. Because these sensory triggers are sufficiently similar Tim has, in an instant, been transported back to his cot, reawakening his sense of terror, rage and insignificance.

The words he screams at his mother probably replicate the phrases he heard back then.

Oh, if only she knew. What a difference it would make to her. Her view of him. Her parenting techniques. Her therapeutic strategies.

bubble-wrapped metaphor

Metaphorically, traumatised children wrap themselves in bubble wrap as an effective protection strategy. However, it distorts their view of the world and our view of them (notice the blurring on the top right of picture). The role of therapeutic parents is to gently help the child remove the

sensory experiences with extreme neglect



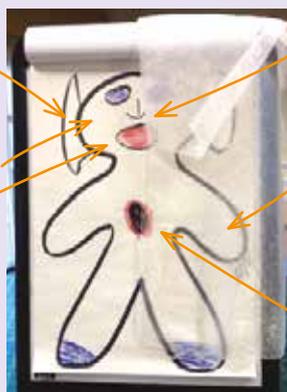
Hear - crashing doors ... "shut up you stupid bi**h"



See - darkness



Taste - sour milk and vomit



Smell - own faeces and urine: vomit and sour milk



Feel - cracked skin of nappy rash from stomach to knees

Feel - cold feet, gripping stomach pains from hunger

trauma can distort a child's view of the world

bubble wrap, transforming their underlying negative beliefs and corrupted sense of self.

Assisting a child to reframe their past is much easier if you know the truth about their past. The real truth. Not a sanitised pink fluffy life story book but the whole uncensored historic truth. The child already knows it in their body, yet the stories they are told often do not match their intrinsic experience. 100% truth-telling in an age-appropriate way stops the mismatching, fantasies and lies.

An honest, coherent narrative which matches their sensory memories, presented in a digestible and appropriate way will help future-proof children. This strategy dissolves some of the shrapnel and allows children to comprehend their own reactions, behaviour and triggers.

We must see beyond the presenting behaviour and have the courage to address, demystify and reframe the past. Without the truth, our children are relentlessly trapped inside their old traumatising cot. ●

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