

# Book Reviews

## **I Can't Get Over It; A Handbook for Trauma Survivors**

*By Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D  
New Harbinger Publications  
Inc, U.S.A, 1992.*

The effects of trauma have been chronicled by historians, writers and medical practitioners throughout history. Matsakis notes for example, that the historian Herodotus wrote that during the battle of Marathon in 490BC, an Athenian soldier who suffered no wounds became permanently blind after witnessing the death of the soldier next to him, while in the 1600s, Samuel Pepys wrote of the insomnia, anger and depression experienced by himself and other survivors after the great fire of London. The author points out however, that the largely undiagnosed problem of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, was only officially recognised by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980.

In 1994 the area of traumatology and its implications for counselling is still relatively sparse in resources, research and training programmes. Yet a significant proportion of those seeking counselling for interpersonal difficulties, depression or addictions are survivors of trauma experiences such as sexual abuse, family violence, rape, crime, war or natural catastrophes. Among counsellors there is a growing awareness of the significance of the impact of trauma on such survivors. Dr Matsakis' comprehensive handbook for trauma survivors is therefore a valuable and much needed resource for both the survivor of trauma to whom it is primarily addressed, and for counsellors as an informative and sensitive guide that will contribute to their understanding and practice in this area.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section is concerned with developing an understanding of trauma and PTSD beginning with an extensive illustration of this syndrome,

followed by an assessment questionnaire to help the trauma survivor ascertain whether he or she is experiencing PTSD. Specific techniques are also suggested to help the survivor gain more of a sense of control over events and their reactions to symbolic reminders, that can trigger potentially disabling PTSD symptoms.

In the second section Matsakis offers a compassionate and insightful step by step guide to assist the survivor through the emotional experiences that are a part of healing from trauma. For clarity and direction the author has separated the healing process into 3 stages. Stage 1: Remembering the trauma. Stage 2: Feeling the feelings, living with anger, understanding grief and sorrow. Stage 3: Attaining empowerment. Finally the third section looks at specific traumas, including rape and sexual assault, domestic violence, including sexual abuse, natural catastrophes, vehicular accidents and war and combat. The exercises and reflective questions put to the survivor in these chapters offer germane life affirming and survivor affirming perspectives that normalise the survivor's response to trauma and are also instrumental in reempowering the survivor toward new hope, life goals and self acceptance.

There is, however, one recognisable gap in the book: Matsakis does not take sufficient account of the influence of a survivor's system of cultural meaning in constructing her framework for the understanding, validation and healing of the effects of trauma. Recognition needs to be given to the influence and therapeutic potential of alternative world views, helping techniques and interpretations of symptoms that resemble PTSD. Further, a vital chapter, that of the refugee experience, is not included in the book, which therefore fails to acknowledge one of the most extensive and penetrating experiences of trauma.

Nevertheless the book illuminates the often hidden wounds of trauma and suffering and contributes valuable perspectives and approaches to healing that will indubitably assist both the trauma survivor and the counsellor working alongside survivors in this area.

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