

## Trauma and Mental Health – An unhealed trauma can be triggered at any time

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Writing about the phenomena of psychological trauma means to address one of the most important issues in Cambodia today. Because the Khmer Rouge Tribunal is finally getting underway, many organizations and many Cambodians are becoming more engaged in the process of national reconciliation and development. Inevitably, one of the results of the increase of outreach work related to national reconciliation will be that many Cambodians will face their personal and collective history of the Khmer Rouge years. Undoubtedly, a wide range of symptoms, such as grief, anger, and other expressions of trauma will emerge from the depths of people's subconsciousness. Many years after the Khmer Rouge atrocities, the trauma in the hearts of many Cambodians is still unresolved.

Research and also the personal experience of many people shows that time does not heal all grief and pain: a trauma can be re-experienced many times throughout one's life.

However, just as the human brain employs different strategies to protect people from psychological and physical pain, the psychological mechanism of "dissociation", which initially helps to cope with an unbearable moment, may lead to unhealthy long-term effects. This tends to happen when people do not integrate their trauma within some weeks or months after it occurs.

***Dissociation*** is a mental process, which produces a lack of connection in a person's thoughts, memories, feelings, actions, or sense of identity. During the period of time when a person is dissociating, certain information is not associated with other information as it normally would be. (1)

***Dissociation*** is the process of becoming physically and/or psychologically disconnected with the internal and external effects that occur during events; e.g.: "I don't feel any pain" or "This doesn't happen to me" or "This isn't me"

Many Cambodians who lived through the Khmer Rouge years did not have the chance to integrate their trauma. They repeatedly had to face traumatic events, and then experience the continuous intrusion of new traumatic events. Without any possibility of finding a safe place to integrate their feelings of fear and pain, and without any support from people who were not traumatized, these Cambodians did not have an opportunity to heal during these times. The consequence for most was to remain in a *state of dissociation*. Thus they were able to avoid feeling the full depth of the pain from the trauma they experienced: The pain would have been too overwhelming. The coping strategy of dissociation allows people to struggle with unfathomable, unbearable circumstances, but with detachment and suppression of feelings. A common result of this phenomenon is that from time to time, the tremendous suppressed grief, sadness, and anger erupts in problematic ways.

However, despite the power of dissociation as a coping mechanism, daily life provides a number of opportunities for grief and other feelings to emerge. The stimuli which are responsible for the emerging of these feelings are called triggers. *A trigger* is an event, an object, a person, or a sensation that sets a series of thoughts in motion or reminds a person of some aspect of his or her traumatic past. A person may be unaware of what is triggering the memory (e.g., loud noises, a particular color, piece of music, odor, etc.). But becoming aware of these triggers, and learning not to overreact to them is an important therapeutic task in the treatment of people who suffer from several emotional, physical, rational, and behavioral trauma symptoms (such as anxiety, detachment, nightmares, increased aggressiveness and use of alcohol) or from severe mental diseases such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

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In Cambodian society, daily life remains filled with triggers. Every frightening personal or social situation may wake the "sleeping dogs" of trauma. This could be the unstable political situation, the insensitive statements of Cambodian leaders, or personal experiences related to corruption, land grabbing, landmines, rape, domestic violence, unprofessional and unjust courts and many more societal problems. As long as life in Cambodia continues to lack real

security and reliability, every single moment can trigger memories of old traumatic experiences and feelings.

To handle the challenges of Cambodian life, people have had to develop specific psychological and behavioral coping strategies, which are pervasive throughout the country. These coping strategies could be constructive or destructive, depending on personal and environmental conditions. **The goal is to avoid the emergence of too much grief and anger related to past traumatic events.**

There is not yet any systematic research about the existence of typical Cambodian coping strategies. Nevertheless, there are **unconscious tendencies** that seem to be common in Cambodia, as in all countries attempting to reconcile their specific history after civil war:

- ♦ **Avoidance of talking** about recent Cambodian history (whether personal, autobiographical events or comprehensive Cambodian history).
- ♦ **Emotional detachment**, which is characterized by a lack of compassion for the suffering of weak, disabled or displaced people. The fact that Cambodians take extremely good care of their relatives and friends reveals that **compassion is often fragmented**. Being in touch with one's own feelings is only possible within the shelter of one's own family. To avoid triggers, people with background trauma often "choose" to avoid the grief and despair of strangers. Unfortunately, the coping strategies they use to deal with trauma often malfunction, due to the large amount of triggers in daily life. Many people channel the triggered energy of grief and anger through domestic violence, alcohol, drug abuse, and other destructive coping mechanisms.
- ♦ **Former victims unconsciously treating other people as they were treated** in the time of the atrocities. Even if they never act as cruelly as they themselves were treated, some of the behavior patterns, the pervasive threat of violence, and the tension within professional relationships often evokes the behavior of the former perpetrators.

A real alternative to these mostly unconscious and often dysfunctional methods of coping with the traumatic past is to integrate the past trauma through a healing process within a

psychological or psychiatric treatment. Traditional Cambodian approaches to reconciling the past are also available.

We know from research related to the situation of Holocaust survivors in Germany that there are always exceptions: some people respond to traumatic experiences with compassion and are able to keep in contact with their feelings, even when it seems impossible.

The variety of positive changes that individuals may experience in their struggles with trauma are described in psychological models of **post-traumatic growth** (2). These changes include improved relationships, new life options, a greater appreciation for life, a greater sense of personal strength, and a deepened sense of spiritual development. This reflects a basic paradox or irony: trauma survivors sometimes find that their losses have produced valuable gains.

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(1) Translated and adapted from: Huber,M. (2003): *Trauma und die Folgen, Trauma und Traumabehandlung Teil 1*, Paderborn: Junfermann.

(2) Tedeschi, R.G., Lawrence Calhoun,L. (2004): *Posttraumatic Growth: A New Perspective on Psychotraumatology* Psychiatric Times, April 2004, Vol. XXI, Issue 4.



Painted by SAM Sarath

A woman is triggered by the black working clothes of the man.