

MIXED MESSAGES - TRAUMA BY ANOTHER NAME

The subject of trauma has come to prominence in the last thirty-five years or so, but its roots date back to the 19th century and the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, who is considered the founder of modern neurology. The term used then was hysteria rather than trauma and he initially considered it a neurological disorder. It was Charcot who was able to demonstrate through his detailed research, that hysteria was psychological in nature. He established this largely through his use of hypnotherapy.

Unfortunately, his research did not give rise to any significant intervention or treatment plan. That element was taken on by his students, who included Sigmund Freud, Pierre Janet, and William James, who all went on to make substantial contributions to the field of psychology. It was their research that lay the foundations for what followed.

Freud and Janet both concluded that hysteria was the result of psychological trauma, something so unbearable that the individual dissociates from the traumatic event, hence their hysteria. Although they described the process in slightly different ways, and used different terminology, they did both agree that one of the ways to process and reduce the impact of trauma, was to speak about it. It's their work, along with Joseph Brueur's that began psychoanalysis and provided the foundation for modern psychotherapy.

It wasn't until the First World War that there was greater exploration of this subject, and the term combat neurosis was coined, a term that would be further investigated by Abraham Kardiner and Herbert Spiegel, who produced the seminal work, *The Traumatic Neuroses of War*. This was to form a modern framework for traumatic syndromes and was one of the precursors to what we now refer to as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Numerous psychologists and psychiatrists have subsequently added to this area of study, and much of the data has been drawn from the theatre of war and those soldiers who were exposed to terrible trauma.

After about a hundred years of research, most of what has been discovered in the arena of combat and war has helped us to better understand trauma in other areas, such as rape and sexual violence, other forms of abuse, emotional, psychological, and physical neglect. What has become clear is that trauma, whatever its origin, has a similar impact on our brains and central nervous systems, leading to maladaptive behaviour.

Christine Courtois' book, *Healing the Incest Wound* (1988), was a powerful text describing treatment for adult survivors of sexual abuse, and for the first time, this kind of abuse was being categorised alongside PTSD, so a new chapter in the story of trauma began.

Over the last 25 years, much more has been documented and written and we now have a plethora of interventions and treatment options for trauma, all with varying degrees of success. These include EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing), EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique), TFT (Thought Field Therapy), TRE (Trauma and Tension Release Exercises), and a range of desensitisation exercises (some known as somatic experiencing), where the victim is exposed incrementally (in a safe space) to their trauma, leading to emotional release. Sensorimotor psychotherapy combines traditional psychotherapy with body-based techniques. The primary objective with this discipline is turning traumatic memories into sources of strength.

Polyvagal theory has added to the palette of options and given rise to a form of intervention, designed to remap the central nervous system, via the autonomic nervous system. This leads to what is known as emotional regulation, where the sufferer/victim is able to better manage the consequences of their trauma.

The reason for this brief excursion through the history of trauma, is to acknowledge and applaud what has been done thus far, but also to cite a very important omission in the definition of what constitutes trauma.

Our practitioners have worked on the front line with trauma for over 40 years, and the clinical experience we have gathered is huge. What's clear is that there is another dimension to trauma that is repeatedly overlooked. It's every bit as potent and toxic as the other kinds of trauma. It's best categorised as mixed messages.

Mixed messages are so damaging that we at Reach believe they should be considered trauma by another name and deserve a classification of their own. You may be familiar with the Chinese description 'death by a thousand cuts' (which was an ancient form of torture). This is a very useful metaphor when thinking about mixed messages because repeated exposure to them leads to the bleeding out of one's life force. The one who experiences them is slowly and painfully diminished, over time.

The reason mixed messages are not given the same status as abuse, deprivation, and neglect, is probably because they are complicated by the fact that they are often disguised by sweetness, sincerity, and generosity. And this disguise conceals the unhealthy impact and consequences that are left in the mind of the sufferer.

Chronic trauma is classified as abuse that is repeated and prolonged. Complex trauma is exposure to varied and multiple traumatic events, which are invasive and interpersonal in nature. Mixed messages meet these criteria as many victims are repeatedly abused over a sustained period and that trauma takes place on many levels – and is certainly invasive and interpersonal.

Mixed messages can offer love, affection, and kindness with one hand and in the next moment, one is presented with cruelty, injustice, and intolerance, leaving the recipient confused and uncertain about where they stand. This kind of exposure is particularly damaging when the recipient is a child, whose sense of self is yet to be formed.

Imagine the child that is told in one moment how wonderful they are and what a joy they are, and then hours later, for no reason they know of, they are told they are in the way and are unceremoniously dismissed. Which of these messages is the child meant to believe or trust?

Imagine the child that eagerly waits for the parent who repeatedly promises to be at their concert, their football match, their sports day, or parents evening and does not turn up, offering excuses, which leaves the child sad and disappointed, wondering about their worth. What should the child conclude from this?

Imagine the tension in the mind of a teenager who's greeted by understanding, empathy and sensitivity by one parent and impatience, intolerance and anger by the other. How does this duality play out in their mind?

Now imagine your lover and friend telling you that you mean the world to them, and nothing compares with what they feel for you, but never turning up in those moments of crisis, being

emotionally unavailable at your time of greatest need. What impact would this have on your mind and heart?

Imagine the employee whose boss repeatedly praises and validates their work, but every time a promotion opportunity arises, nominates someone else for the role. It suits the boss to keep this employee where they are because keeping them sweet whilst keeping them stuck helps their own cause. As a consequence, the employee is confused and riddled with self-doubt.

Imagine the person who is being systematically abused (child or adult) and being told it's because the abuser loves them, cares about them, and only wants the best for them. Over time, they silently dismiss their own feelings and experience, losing sight of their true value and not knowing who or what to trust.

The list of examples of mixed messages is endless. They can turn up in innocent and seemingly inconsequential ways, or they can be more insidious, as with the last example, presenting as kindness and generosity in one moment, and in the next, stealing the essence of one's humanity.

The demoralising power of mixed messages comes through their repetition. Each time they turn up, they increase their grip. Each time they present themselves, any fault lines of consciousness become bigger, deeper, and wider and the person loses a little bit more of him/herself. It's this fragmentation that can lead to dissociation and dissociative states. At this point subpersonalities are created to help deal with the demand.

Subpersonalities are generally seen as psychological structures that have been created to address life situations and circumstances, where the individual needs a different or better strategy, or where they might be failing. It's important for balance to say that we can have positive subpersonalities that are encouraging, supportive and inspire us. Obviously when they are dominating the inner landscape we can grow in healthy ways and our creative intelligence flows beautifully.

Those who have been significantly exposed to mixed messages will have powerful, negative subpersonalities, which are mocking, unsupportive and undermining. And so, there is an internal tension between the positive and negative camps. Unfortunately, in many cases, even where there is no mental health diagnosis, the negative subpersonalities can dominate the inner world; they win more of the battles, pushing one ever closer to loss of self-belief, faith, and hope. One's courage evaporates and the risks that one needs to take to become one's very best self are avoided, as fear becomes the dictating force. Do you recognise this? A life where you are making choices that do not reflect your truth, where rather than standing up and being counted, you camouflage yourself in the crowd?

If we want to be free of this darkness, which has eclipsed our light, then we need to understand that mixed messages are potent, toxic forces, and therefore need a response to match. Far too often mixed messages are overlooked and as a result their severity and power are not considered or calculated when assessing someone's condition. But consider this, if someone is exposed to positive attention one moment and the withdrawal of affection in the next, glowing affirmation in one moment and brutal criticism in the next, what will the consequences be? It might take time to be visible but what it will cause is confusion, doubt and at its worst, personal disgust, and self-loathing.

The therapeutic world cannot afford to ignore mixed messages any longer because they cause untold damage in the lives of individuals, relationships, families, and the wider social context.

How do we fix this?

How do we free ourselves from the consequences of a culture of mixed messages? The answer is simple, but the challenge comes in the execution.

1. Begin with a detailed audit. If you don't know what form the mixed messages take and how they influence your life, it will be difficult to eradicate them. This takes great honesty and attention. If you're not paying attention, and are unwilling to expose the uncomfortable truths, then those mixed messages will continue to shape your attitude, outlook, and behaviour.
2. Once those mixed messages have been identified, seek resolution for the underlying causes of your distress and trauma. You may need professional help to do this, but you may feel up to the task yourself. Either way, don't sit in the toxic waste of the past, doing nothing, because it will steal the present and your future.
3. Consistency is the thing that will most radically change your fate, so it's important to build a life with positive routines. This is how you reclaim your personal power.
4. Creating boundaries and honouring them is a necessary ingredient for positive change.
5. Create a mission statement, a philosophy that outlines your values and principles and how you intend to live by them. We need a code of conduct which we honour, to overthrow the tyranny of mixed messages.
6. It is often said, 'the devil is in the detail', but it's worth remembering that the truth is in the detail too. If you get the small things right, you will find that the big things follow suit.
7. Transformation depends on regularly spending time in trance. The more we immerse the brain and the mind in trance states (alpha/theta), the more easily we can trance-form. This is not just a clever play on words, it's a fact that the neurons in the brain are better able to honour our intentions and instructions when we are in trance. So, it's important to spend some time in trance every day. There are so many ways to do this (conscious breathing, mindfulness, creative visualisation, mantra-mind thinking, meditation, to name a few) – find what works best for you.
8. You will need to learn to live comfortably with your ambivalence. We can't change the consequences of mixed messages without acceptance. Acceptance is the most powerful way to change what you are dissatisfied with. When you can accept your current position (however ugly you may think it is), you're able to create a new, brighter you.
9. Whenever you are a recipient of mixed messages, either remove yourself from that situation or build an immune system with your positive practices, that will protect you from those invasions.
10. Mixed messages need not be feared, they need to be understood. Like all trauma, they can be healed, but we need to become healthily obsessed with the solutions. Remember, knowledge plus application equals personal empowerment, and if we are patient and kind with ourselves, our victory is assured.