



Coach Thyself: Flashbacks, Blurbacks, and Trauma

Suppose I told you that, often enough, your feelings and even your perceptions were not in touch with reality? Would you be concerned? If so, or if you would like to be more aware when this is happening to friends or family—you need to understand how your brain processes overwhelming experiences. It's very simple really. And it completely demystifies a word we've heard tossed around for decades now. That word is "trauma."

Let's say you are sitting in your favorite French restaurant (or Thai, if you like) and someone is shot at the table next to you. The police arrive pretty quickly, though, the gunman is apprehended, and the victim receives only a flesh wound. A year later, then, without thinking about it, you eat for the first time again some French (or Thai) cooking, and—you can't.

The food is tasteless, and you soon feel slightly ill. You think the ingredients are bad, maybe, and avoid that restaurant. But in fact, as time passes, it happens elsewhere again. How strange... You start to become suspicious of what's going on in the kitchens and ingredient supply chains of local French (or Thai) establishments.

Here's what's going on. When neither fight nor flight is possible in situations of really serious threat, your brain and body do a kind of disassembling act. This is called the "freeze response." It's automatic. Your body's goal is to hold perfectly still (play dead, as it were), numb the organs and limbs so

that injury causes less pain, and shut down blood flow to peripheral regions of the body. As part of this, something in the brainstem called the hippocampus stops working.

What the hippocampus has been doing up to this point is pretty important. When it stops doing it, your self-awareness goes away. Oversimplifying just a bit, the full sweep of what's happening to you is still experienced and recorded in your right brain. But it never gets processed by your left-brain. And that's the side that can talk about it, think about it, learn from it, tell stories about it—and generally make it an assimilated part of your life experience.

From that point on (until you do something about it), you are vulnerable in a certain way. Elaborate, "implicit" memories in your right brain, which are not yet folded into "you," rise up in your feelings and perceptions whenever something similar happens. You tend to experience these as part of what is happening now, because your left-brain never processed them originally. They pin themselves on the present, so to speak.

It's not that you'll see a dog as a chair, or a man as a woman. It's about subtler interactions. You might well experience the dog as hostile when it isn't, for instance, or the man as cowardly when he is actually in a quiet part of a very brave response. In more extreme cases, the combat veteran, ten years after deployment, hears a car backfire. He has dropped his bag of groceries and slid under a delivery van before he even knows it.

We've all heard about PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome). That's the name given to this condition generally in the more extreme cases.

What the combat veteran experienced, or even actual hallucinations, are called "flashbacks." But most of us have milder versions of this affecting us in some areas of our lives—around the opposite sex, relationships, bosses, tests, and so on. There's been no name for these, but we need one.

In Chapter Five of my recent book¹, I called them "blurbacks." We are feeling and hearing and seeing the world around us through a blur of old feelings that masquerade as present tense when they are not. If you are aware of this, and on the lookout for it in yourself and others, it can save you considerable trouble. How many unintegrated parts of your past are blurring your experience of the present?

Most of our milder blurbacks come from a form of trauma different from that based on sudden, extreme events. Lesser threatening situations that repeat themselves over and over again eventually create the same kind of unprocessed implicit memories. Here, it's not one event, but rather the same pattern of overwhelm showing up in many events. As the oldest son of an alcoholic father, for example, I got lots of pattern-based trauma.

We are lucky these days, because there are many new ways to get help (or actually help yourself) with milder, but still problematic kinds of blurbacks. CLEAR, EFT, and EMDR² all work with your body, mind, and feelings simultaneously. Learning to spot blurbacks can change your life. Removing them is even better. ▲

Footnotes & Recommended Reading

¹Michael Reddy, *Health, Happiness, & Family Constellations* (2012).

²Julie Roberts, *Change Works with CLEAR* (2009); Gary Craig, *The EFT Manual* (2011); Francine Shapiro, *Getting Past Your Past* (2012).