

Learning & Development

Overcoming Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

In the second of two articles on the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, cognitive hypnotherapist, **Trevor Silvester** of the Quest Institute gives an example of how one sufferer overcame the condition which was dictating his life



Photo by Sean Vatcher: www.firephotos.co.uk

Post traumatic stress disorder can be triggered by a range of influences and experiences

HAVING TREATED MANY CLIENTS FOR Post Traumatic Stress Disorder over the years, the only real consistency about the condition is that they all have different stories to tell and unique responses to their experience. As an ex-police officer myself with 18 years of service, the treatment of PTSD is something that I feel strongly about – and the good news is that it is a condition for which there are real solutions that do actually work long term.

Last year I worked with a serving police officer who was struggling to deal with the effects of what had originally been diagnosed as depression following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Whilst the names have been changed to ensure confidentiality, his story is a fascinating one which illustrates how effective these techniques can be.

Chris's Story

"I joined the police at the age of 21 in search of better pay and more excitement than being a trainee quantity surveyor was bringing me. I loved it, and often think that I didn't 'come up for air' for the first ten years. The mixture of adrenalin and helping people was an intoxicating mix and I thought it the most rewarding job anyone could do. I've experienced the best and worst the job can offer – including being set on fire during a riot – and can honestly say that I enjoyed it all.

"Things began to change after I came home one afternoon, turned on the TV and saw to my horror, the Twin Towers on fire. I remember when I was ten my dad showing me a picture of it being built, and the conversation we'd had about it. He was so enthusiastic about the future and what it would bring, and I think it made a big impression on me. The picture was pinned up in the garage for many years.

"I was called to dinner and remember sitting with my family when I had this sudden flood of panic. It felt like I was going to have a heart attack. I excused myself so as not to worry the family, and after a while it calmed down. From then on things started escalating.

"I started feeling claustrophobic and panicky so I went to see my GP who diagnosed me with depression and prescribed beta blockers. I asked for a private referral and was sent to a psychologist. I described my inexplicable fear of the world to him and was prescribed two stronger tranquilisers. I saw him a few more times before he referred me to another psychologist whom I then saw for the next two years. He assisted me by teaching me relaxation techniques, but was never able to get to the root of the problem. I decided to help myself, coming off the medication, and reading self help books, where I gleaned the knowledge that I would

always have this problem and that I should just think 'so what' if I had a panic attack.

"I struggled on, losing the ability to do many things that people consider normal – like using lifts, travelling on planes or trains. At my worst I couldn't even go over flyovers.

"My GP referred me for two stints of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Again, this helped me cope, but didn't bring any relief as such, and I was losing hope that I could recover. I also developed hypertension, which I've been on medication for the past two years.

"Then, in January 2008 I attended a talk by Trevor. I was so impressed by the sense he was making that I enrolled on his course to become a cognitive hypnotherapist, firstly to help myself, but also in the hope that what I learnt could help others in my predicament. The difference the understanding from the course made to my condition was, in itself, unbelievable. I started to use some of the techniques we were taught and noticed that I was beginning to feel differently about things. But the big change came when I volunteered to be the subject for one of Trevor's demonstrations."

The Unconscious Trigger

Chris came up to me after I had asked for a volunteer to demonstrate a technique that is very effective for phobias, but also excellent for traumatic memories. Chris described briefly that he had claustrophobia, and I thought that would be an interesting example – and one that made it easy to prove that the technique worked – all that we needed was a cupboard!

It very quickly became apparent that there was more to Chris's problem. It was easy to determine – he used lifts as an example of his fear, and pointed to his chest for where he got the feeling. I then asked him if he got that feeling in any other situation, and it quickly became a shopping list. Trains, and planes fitted the pattern, but other situations did not seem to be related to the size of space he was in. I said earlier that in cognitive hypnotherapy we do not diagnose – in fact we are not qualified to – we just work on the description of the problem and then work to change it. However, it is helpful to understand that a phobia is an extreme emotional response to an ordinary object or situation. In my model, it is a perfect example of the fight or flight

by Trevor Silvester

response in action owing to the matching of something in our present with something stored in our brain from the past as a threat. For me, the only difference between a phobia and other anxiety disorders (like PTSD) is that with the latter, the precise trigger for the response is often out of conscious awareness. If people have a phobia, they know they are running away from a mouse, but PTSD sufferers often do not realise they are running away from the presence of a background colour, sound or smell.

In Chris's case, the situations seemed to be quite generalised – ie not specific to confined spaces, and the mention of 9/11 obviously made me consider PTSD. There have been many reports around the world of a condition that might be described as vicarious PTSD, where observing a traumatic event in the media causes the brain to respond as if they are present. Our brains run simulations of other people's experiences – it is the basis for empathy, and some people appear susceptible to simulating it so strongly that, emotionally, it becomes their experience too.

PTSD is not something I would usually work with as part of a group demonstration, and I considered halting the technique, but having known Chris for six months, I felt it would be OK to continue, at least for a while. Chris was not suffering flashbacks – the strongest indicator of the first source of origin, and I felt it most likely that it was the meaning of 9/11 that had caused his response.

Going Back to the Origin

I used a technique that conversationally regresses people back to the origin of the emotion they are feeling. They are dissociated, so they do not have to relive the emotions – it is like looking at the event on a cinema screen. The specific questions I ask tend to reveal the sensitising event. (It is a Freudian myth that such memories are buried deep in the psyche. Memories that are accessed often are usually readily available).

In this case, Chris went back to seeing the Twin Towers on TV in his living room, but without the kind of emotional response that would usually make it the cause of an anxiety disorder. A few more questions moved him forward to when he was called to dinner, sitting with his wife and children, everything he holds dear in the world. At this point, Chris suddenly realised that his brain had formed a connection between them and the conversation with his father about hope for the future symbolised by the Twin Towers all those years ago.

An important part of a problem pattern is consequence. In many ways, our brains can be thought of as anticipation machines. The brain uses the past to give meaning to the present, and then uses this interpretation as a means of predicting the future. At that moment,

sitting with his family, Chris's brain saw the end of hope and optimism for their future. And ever since, his brain has been on high alert to protect them from the uncertainty of what comes next. Anxiety is always an emotion about what is about to happen; Chris's brain was primed to expect another disaster.

Once he had made that connection, I used the rewind technique that I was demonstrating to change the structure of the memory in a way that releases the emotion from it, and then consolidated it with an approach to hypnotic suggestion I call Wordweaving.

Choices

Chris takes up the story:

"Trevor completed the intervention in about 20 minutes and even before I opened my eyes, I knew I felt different. I couldn't wait to prove to myself that I could now travel in a lift. We went over to one in the building and spent the next ten minutes going up and down; at first with Trevor, and then on my own. Later I was so excited that I repeated it with some of my classmates. Since then, I have travelled on the tube and overground trains, and know that I'm going to make a full recovery.

"It's obvious to me that I had developed PTSD which had gone completely undiagnosed. The memory of my dad and the Twin Towers and my optimism for the future was literally blown apart. If only I'd known about cognitive hypnotherapy then I'd have been saved eight years of stress and anxiety. My quest now is to use my qualification to offer my services to others like me who would benefit."

Chris's experience is a particularly interesting example which stands outside of what most people would expect to be the experience of someone with PTSD. The assumption is that it is most likely to happen to service people in the execution of their duty, but this is not always so. The reality is that it can happen for any reason to anyone who is overwhelmed by an experience they have had. Hopefully it will help people to know that.

Chris's story is also unusual for the speed with which his problem was resolved through cognitive hypnotherapy. Unfortunately, not everyone can be helped in such a very short space of time, but the important point to make is that it can happen. Most of the people that I see with PTSD respond quickly, and the cognitive approach is one that works. Those suffering the debilitating and life altering effects of this disorder deserve to be informed of all the options for treatment at their disposal. That way they can make a choice – and hopefully find the way that works for them.

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About the Author:

A former police officer, Trevor Silvester is the founder of the Quest Institute which specialises in cognitive hypnotherapy and NLP and is one of the largest and most successful hypnotherapy training institutions in the UK. His work with clients includes helping people overcome a range of issues such as anxiety disorders and PTSD. He also helps sports people improve their performance using mind body techniques. A published author and popular speaker, Trevor also runs a private practice in Harley Street, London. To order Trevor's books and audio downloads, to find out more about the Quest training package, or the network of therapists he has trained, visit: www.questinstitute.co.uk For more information about seeing Trevor, visit: www.trevorsilvester.com