

Trauma and dissociation informed psychotherapy: Relational healing and the therapeutic connection

George Halasz

Elizabeth Howell, New York, W. W. Norton (2020). ISBN: 9780393713732 (hardcover), ISBN: 9780393713749 (epub).

The term ‘wounded healer’ takes on a new meaning in the current COVID-19 pandemic as front-line workers and patients are equally at risk for infection with the coronavirus. As with our traumatised patients, so we encounter in ourselves – as psychiatrists and psychotherapists – well-known and overlapping symptoms of moral distress or injury, burnout, relational trauma and dissociation, or symptoms of simple or complex post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

As with the person to person transmission of the coronavirus, transmission of trauma between people risks vicarious trauma and dissociation. Clinical tele-health is now integral to part of our safe ‘social distancing’ as protection against infection. What additional changes should we adopt in our therapeutic approach against vicarious trauma?

In nine chapters,¹ has managed to identify, assimilate and integrate the complex historical legacy of the century-long trauma debate between Freudian ‘repression’ and Janetian ‘dissociation’. She offers a trans-diagnostic resolution – the ‘mind-body’ dichotomy; reconciles disorganised attachment as dissociation; and provides a

parsimonious definition of trauma as ‘that which causes dissociation’.

Redefining trauma as the cause of dissociation, Howell reformulates the ‘clinical dyad as a wounded dyad’, the title of chapter 4, ‘a dramatic change from the old paradigm’ (p. 59).

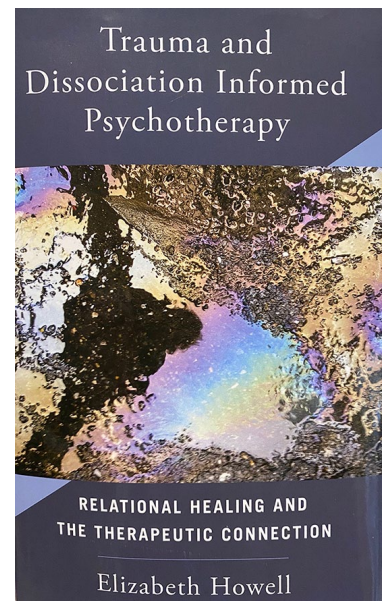
Howell’s new paradigm focuses on our interrupted subjectivity triggered by our traumatised patients. She highlights the impact of the bi-directional dynamics in the therapeutic alliance of feelings of terror, shame, loneliness and abandonment leading to the overwhelming experiences of trauma and dissociation.

Being attuned with our traumatised patients, she reassures us, ‘There is no shame in woundedness. It happens to all of us. Yet trauma, especially relational trauma, often carries intense shame’ (p. 74).

Hence the wounded dyad. Hence the need for trauma’s new metaphor to replace the dominant psychoanalytic metaphor of the Oedipus myth with Osiris, the revered Egyptian god of the Nile and his traumatised wife-sister Isis, who resuscitated him with her tears of mourning (p. 172).

Howell elegantly transposes such grief-based work to moments of reparative experiences in attachment, relationality and dissociation that ultimately leads, in her final chapter, to an ‘interpersonal intersubjectivity’ that promotes ‘intrapersonal intersubjectivity’ (p. 181).

Howell’s nuanced clinical case studies add substantial momentum to the current paradigm change in psychotherapy. A close reading of her trenchant, elegant



arguments will benefit many patients and all therapists. While reviewing the book to write a blurb, I found myself wondering if I had also transformed over the last decade from the ‘wounded healer’ to the ‘ruptured therapist’ as I adopted the paradigm change in my clinical practice.

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Reference

1. Howell E. *Trauma and dissociation informed psychotherapy: Relational healing the therapeutic connection*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2020.

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