

Identity Restoration, Posttraumatic Growth and Cultural Connectedness

by Alexis Phillips and Shaun Phillips (September 1, 2012) Published in TFI Newsletter *In Focus* November 2013

Focusing-Oriented Therapy and Complex Trauma (FOTCT) is a model of training that teaches specialized skills for working with all forms of trauma, past and present. FOTCT refers to complex trauma as trauma that occurred repeatedly and cumulatively, usually over a period of time and within specific relationships and contexts. Trauma can sometimes become “stuck” at earlier developmental stages, interfering with present day functioning. FOTCT is less concerned with the story of what happened to the client, but rather attends to where the client is stuck. This ability to focus on the stuck process, rather than being led astray by the content of the wound allows clients to heal more efficiently and completely. In essence, this process allows clients to access their core self through felt sensing. The skills learned in FOTCT can facilitate the release of body held trauma, helping one’s life to move forward with healing and a greater sense of well-being.

When clients experience complex trauma, they often fragment to survive. These arrested processes remain in their bodies, trying to be acknowledged. They may appear as intrusive memories, nightmares, flashbacks, devastating inner critics, cutting rituals and other adaptive responses to trauma. Clients often don’t recognize these responses as lost parts of themselves. Instead, clients and often the therapists working with them want to fix or erase these responses (Parker, 2009).

FOTCT emphasizes the development of a strong observer self so that clients can acknowledge both the part of them that is attending and the part that is experiencing or revisiting the piece of history they are working with. Having a strong observer generates healing in and of itself, as it allows clients to acknowledge and go through what they are sensing without fixating upon it as part of their identity. FOTCT aims at increasing the client’s functioning in the present in service of creating a better today and tomorrow. As such, identity restoration is critical.

Helping the clients find themselves in the aftermath of trauma, when they may feel lost and alone struggling to find the way back to themselves is paramount. The body strives for completion and generally knows how to find its way back to wholeness. FOTCT encourages clients to reclaim the self, one’s own authority, and one’s connectedness to and trust in one’s inner wisdom. The ability to survive and even thrive in the face of adversity has been linked with tapping into our own natural, spiritual resilience (Young & Nadeau, 2005).

Honoring the person's sense of identity challenges the Western model of stigmatizing and labeling which tends to compartmentalize the person into symptoms. As clients find their way through complex trauma, many begin to view the trauma as knowledge and wisdom as evidenced in the following: "The more I'm fed by all the wonderful things that the world has to offer, the more I can reflect on what did happen as just an experience I had and not who I am" (Phillips & Daniluk, 2004, p.180); "I think I would never trade a day of my life ever because I think my history, the sexual abuse included, has totally informed my life and made it an amazing adventure" (Phillips, 2001, p.124).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), like much trauma language, reduces suffering to a condition of medical pathology. The medical model compartmentalizes and stigmatizes traumatic responses and reactions and turns the behaviours into symptoms of a pathological condition. FOTCT suggests a paradigm shift away from seeing the client as broken. Instead, the client is seen as adaptive, responding to adversity with creativity and courage. When viewed through this lens, complex trauma responses are viewed as profound, sacred and transforming teachings. They are also viewed as intergenerational and ancestral wisdom (S. Turcotte, personal communication, June 22, 2012).

FOTCT acknowledges the impact of power differentials, sexual, social, political, organizational and racial impacts, and how these influence trauma recovery. While mainstream treatment often focuses on individuals, FOTCT brings awareness to the whole family and community that surround the client. In FOTCT we begin to repair the fragmentation of the mind-body-spirit caused by multiple violations and recover the mind-body-spirit's relationship with self, land, and community so that a sense of interconnection can be restored (Young and Deneau, 1995).

The authors have had their own deeply personal connection to this process. As brother and sister, sharing a childhood history of physical and sexual abuse they feel strongly that they would not be as healthy as they are without the FOTCT process. In 1987 at the age of nineteen Shaun was the first to find a Focusing-Oriented Therapist. He later introduced Alexis to an FOTCT therapist.

For Alexis, the aftermath of trauma left her disconnected with her body, her experience and her emotions. She felt empty, like there was something fundamentally wrong with her. She felt a sense of disconnect with herself and the people around her. In order to survive the breach and betrayal resulting from the trauma, Alexis developed a fragmented identity. The abuse was separated from conscious awareness and memory using denial, voluntary suppression of thoughts and dissociation.

In her early 20's the buried trauma was triggered and Alexis developed PTSD. The FOTCT process helped her to find her way back to herself so that she could repair the fragmentation and develop an integrated identity. As she gathered the fragmented aspects of herself and her experience, she was able to be in relationship with herself and the people around her.

For Shaun, it was a different experience. He was in theatre school in his late teens- early 20's and was working to build a relationship with his body and voice in preparation for his work as an actor. FOTCT helped him to be more friendly and curious with his flashbacks and the dissociated and fragmented aspects of himself as he connected into his body and breath. Shaun however, continued to feel a strong sense of disillusionment with spirituality and disconnect to his feelings. He found his way to *Mother Earth's Spiritual Camp*, a place of healing for young people from all directions of the Medicine Wheel led by Aboriginal elder Dave Courchene. Shaun also spent time living in a remote village in Malawi, Central Africa. For Shaun, it was the combination of theatre school, FOTCT and being in community, particularly communities where he was with other people living with and healing from pain and trauma that augmented his healing. Shaun's fragmented pieces began to integrate and his connection to spirituality re-immersed.

Perhaps what has been so special and unique for these two siblings is that they are now able to teach FOTCT as a team. Sharing their personal stories is a way of teaching the FOTCT process and bringing further repair to the fragmentation, which can sometimes be part of the legacy of complex trauma. It is also a way of further deepening their healing and commitment to connection. The FOTCT process enabled the healing of the spiritual breach, which can often occur as a result of multiple assaults and long-term trauma. For Shaun and Alexis Focusing is a way of being in the world and a way of being in connection with self, spirit and community.

In coping and rebuilding their lives, some may arrive at a new level of meaning, a changed life philosophy that represents a renewed and valued purpose, a refined sense of self, and a changed relationship to the world. Tadeschi and Calhoun (1995) refer to this shift in meaning as posttraumatic growth.

I am the person I am because of all my experiences and there are plenty of things that I wouldn't give up and so there's no sense in thinking these things shouldn't have happened to me because I don't know what I'd be like now if these things hadn't happened (Phillips, 2001, p.124)

FOTCT is inclusive of cultural, ethnic and spiritual awareness. It reaches beyond common assumptions that we are all the same regardless of our cultural ancestry and experiences. It connects with the unique diversity of histories and experiences of human beings. The cultural imperative of interconnectedness allows the client to be acknowledged as being embedded in their cultural context (Poonwassie, 2009).

Focusing-Oriented Therapy acknowledges traditional cultural imperatives of non-interference and is therefore non-colonizing and allows people control over their healing process. The client may choose to reject a stigmatized sense of self, forging an individual and collective identity that includes all aspects of the self. The change process may then move outwards beyond the individual to the collective whole. As individuals we are all embedded in relationships and social and cultural contexts. As such, individual change can become societal change, as the change in the individual can foster change in the family and community.

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