

ELKANAH COUNSELLING

www.elkanahcounselling.com.au

Autumn/Winter 2009

1 Whitehorse Road
Balwyn VIC 3103

Phone: 9817 5654
Fax: 9817 5654

Reception staff:
Helen Waterworth
Robyn Everest

Reception Hours:
10.00 am – 4.00 pm
Monday – Friday

Consultation Hours:
8.00 am – 8.00 pm
Monday – Friday

8.00 am – 12.00 pm
Saturday

Consultations by
appointment only.

After hours: Elkanah
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contacted on 131114.

**JOHN
ANDERSEN**
B.A., Dip. Psych.,
M.A., M. Sc.,
M.V.A.F.T.



**LYN
SHAND**
B.A., Dip.Ed., Grad.
Dip. Psych.,
M.V.A.F.T., M.A.P.S.



**KERRYL
BEISSEL**
B.Sc (Hons – Psych),
M.A.P.S.



**SYLVIA
WERBA**
B.Ed. (Psych.),
T.Sp.T.C., M.A.P.S.



**MELANIE
BIRCH**
B.A., B.B.Sc.
(Hons), Cert Pastoral
Psych, Adv. Cert
Trauma, M.A.P.S.



**EDDY
KLEYNHANS**
M.A., Member,
College of Health
Psych., M.A.P.S.



Maintaining Optimism - Repeated!

In our last newsletter we noted the daily bad news that seemed to pervade the airwaves and the anxiety that this might bring for some.

Little could we have known then the events that were to come in the new year. A heat wave in January, the severity of which we have not seen since the keeping of records began in the mid-1880s. The peak lasted three days in Melbourne but was much longer for northern Victoria. It is estimated to have caused a death toll of over three hundred from the direct and indirect effects of the heat.

And then just a week later the most calamitous firestorms for Victoria in living memory. The death toll although lower than for the heat wave is all the more shocking for the violent way in which these lives were taken.

Presently our airwaves are filled with both economic news and reports from the Royal Commission.

We have built on the articles from the last newsletter to offer support for both adults and children.

Lyn Shand
– **Psychologist & Family Therapist**

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Trauma as Human Experience

John Andersen

The Black Saturday bushfires left us traumatised as a community. It was a huge disaster that touched many people. Some people with devastating impact, with loss of life, serious injury, loss of property, loss of livelihood, loss of irreplaceable possessions, loss of habitat, end of a lifestyle. Things will never be the same. Trauma.

The impact of trauma has two aspects to it. There is the objective aspect of the circumstances. What actually happens. The extent to which one is actually injured. The nature of the danger. How successful one was in escaping or avoiding what could have happened. There are all sorts of events and circumstances that are traumatic. Then there is the subjective aspect, the experience of the event, the experience of the trauma with its overwhelming emotions of fear, panic, crisis, helplessness, desperation, hope, courage, endurance, and sheer cussedness. Every person's experience of trauma is unique.

When we experience trauma, a common response is one of protest. "This should never have happened!" "It ought not to be this way!" Trauma is an unwelcome visitor that interrupts, disrupts or even derails our lives. It does not belong. It is not a part of ordinary life. It ought not to be so. So we protest and we reject it. This unwillingness to accept the fact that traumatic events occur is a natural response. We do not want pain or events that bring suffering. Even more than that, where trauma is the result of other people doing clearly the wrong thing (such as lighting bush fires), we recognize that there is a criminal element in trauma, and we rightly protest against the injury that other people have caused as inexcusably wrong. It ought not to have happened. So it is hard to accept.

Yet, traumatic experiences are a part of life. Every person experiences trauma at different times. Some more than others. The circumstances vary. Yet there is no life that is untouched by trauma. In that respect it is a profoundly normal aspect of human life. Life involves love, work, and trauma.

We all experience trauma. The impact of trauma, however, is not just a matter of the circumstances, or how we are affected by them. The impact of trauma is also determined by how we respond to it. This is especially true of the long term impact. How we respond to the traumatic experiences we have significantly determines their long-term impact on us.

For trauma brings a personal crisis. A crisis that challenges us with big questions. “Will I break?” “Will I survive?” A crisis that contains the possibility that I will not cope, that I will not manage, that I will not recover, that I will not survive. The crisis of trauma contains these destructive possibilities. They are real.

Trauma may trigger a crisis of faith and of world view. My assumptions about my life as an ongoing affair, and about my world may be shattered by the traumatic experience. I find the world is not safe. The things I assumed to be are no longer so. People are not safe. It raises questions like, “Is the universe a friendly place?” “Are people safe?” “Can they be trusted?” “Can God be trusted?” And I am cast into a terrifying place of disorientation and confusion where nothing makes sense any more, and I am threatened with despair. In these circumstances, the crisis of trauma involves the challenge of reconstructing my world in a way that allows for hope, optimism, and a sense of a good future.

The crisis of trauma challenges my durability. Do I have it in me to endure, to recover, to bounce back? Trauma tests my endurance. Trauma tests my character. Trauma measures my resilience. The crisis of trauma often brings a test of character. How successful a person is in passing that test has a significant influence on the long-term impact of that traumatic experience. The psychological question that traumatic experiences raise is, “Do I pass the test?” Passing the test yields fruit of strength of character, wisdom, personal maturity, durability.

There is a way in which traumatic experiences make a unique contribution to the development of human character. It develops strength, endurance, long-suffering, resilience, compassion, sensitivity, courage. These are attractive qualities, indeed virtues. A person who has experienced no trauma we regard as spoilt, self-centered, immature, lacking character, self-indulgent. They have not developed as a person.

This is why trauma is both a crisis and an opportunity. It presents us with the challenge, “What am I going to make of this unwelcome experience?” “How shall I respond?” “In what way is my character being tested?” “What must I do to pass the test?” How can I use this experience so that it develops me, rather than merely damages me? How each one of us answers these types of questions is key to what we make of our traumatic experiences.

Discussing Traumatic Events With Children

Sylvia B. Werba

In the light of recent world events and consequent media coverage, it is likely that many of us - including children have been subjected to some significantly traumatic images, experiences and situations – whether directly or indirectly.

One of the most difficult tasks for a parent is to harness their own coping mechanisms in order to discuss a tragic or sad event with their children. This can range from the death of a family member or the death of a pet, to a natural disaster or some other local or international crisis. Although parents generally wish to shield children from such things, this is not always possible. However daunting it may seem, adults have the responsibility to engender hope and optimism in whatever way is possible.

Although there is no way to make this task easy, there are some basic guidelines which may assist to steer the discussion in a way that may be helpful.

- **Remember to consider the developmental level of your child/children.** Remember that different children will be at different stages.
- **Listen to your children carefully.** Try to gauge what it is that they understand or believe, and then what may be behind their question(s).
- **Invite questions.** **If you yourself have difficulty answering the question, it is OK to say that you need some time to think about it – and perhaps ask for some help yourself.*
- **Acknowledge your own feelings.** It is important to acknowledge that even adults must deal with their own emotions, and then demonstrate ways to deal appropriately and constructively with these feelings.
- **Remember it is OK for children to know that sometimes adults worry – but it is just as important for adults to model ways to deal with this**
- **Brainstorm constructive ways to help, or to show concern or care –** such as sending letters, cards, toys, or collecting some money for those affected.
- **Give children reassurance.** Assure them that all is being done to assist those directly affected by the crisis, and once again reassure them that you are there to love and protect them.
- **Minimise television viewing after a world or community trauma – particularly the news.**
- **Children express grief or fear differently to adults.** It helps to sit down privately with your child and ask them what they are thinking – You can begin by telling them how you are feeling.

- **Avoid “difficult” discussions just before bedtime.** Always talk about something constructive or positive, just before bedtime.
- **Structure helps.** One of the things that helps children through difficult times, is a continuity of family structure, routines and traditions. Keep the family together. *While children need to have the tragedy acknowledged, they also need to know that the world will go on.*
- **It is crucial to allow children to enjoy outings and activities guilt free.** It is important for those who are not directly affected by the tragedy, to continue with life and to look after themselves, so that they are then able to help others. **Laughter and fun will help the world to heal – and will help the children believe that this is possible.**

The role of parents is not to shield their children from tragedy, but to help their children become resilient enough to survive it. In the midst of this difficult world climate, we have the responsibility to engender hope and optimism – as much as we possibly can. Often this is not easily managed alone. If you need help, ask for it from friends, family, or a helping professional.

- **We must do what we can to help our children feel safe.**
- **We must help our children feel empowered.**
- **We must keep hope alive and help our children think towards a future.**
- **We must look after ourselves and each other.**
- **Above all, we must ensure that we do not model blaming and discrimination, in our reactions and behaviour**

During times of war or national crises, children may be exposed to hatred or prejudice aimed at different nationalities or religions. They may themselves be the target of such prejudice. It is extremely important for parents and teachers to teach children that the behaviour of a few does not always represent the behaviour of an entire nation. It is also important to be consistent, to model appropriate behaviour, to invite open discussion, and to report any sign of prejudice to the appropriate authority.

Adults in the child’s world have the responsibility to be role models for the kind of adults they would like their children to become. Hopefully our younger generation will not lose hope, will maintain optimism and excitement for the future, and will learn to be tolerant and respectful adults.

Tragedy does happen – but hope and optimism are hereditary. Our children learn this from us, and we must do whatever we can to keep this alive!

Psychological Problem Solving Skills During Uncertain Economic Crises

Eddy Kleynhans

One does not have to be a rocket scientist to know that the human race is faced with an international credit crunch right now, which is making life not that easy. There is a widespread media coverage that we, even in Australia, have to tighten our belts and that the current economic malaise has devastating effects in all countries around the world. The aforementioned gloomy scenario is reflected by people losing their jobs, companies down-sizing, money markets and large banks collapsing. This gloomy scenario is having a devastating effect on the human psyche which manifested itself in generalised anxiety.

As a Psychologist, I would be asking myself what it is that humans can do to rid themselves of feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Being an optimist and someone that likes to take action, I would be without doubt suggesting that there are solutions to problems. An analogy to this a throw-away-line I saw at the back of a car which read:” Economic Crisis? What crisis? Get yourself an Action Coach!” This line has some positive connotations attached to it in that by taking action, we can solve our financial woes, or any other problem for that matter, be it health, family, etc.

I have spoken to a financial expert once and she compares economic/financial problems with breathing: when we breathe in, we expand our chest and breathe out, we contract. The same applies to financial matters: when times are prosperous, we expand our expenditure and perhaps overspend by buying unnecessary things. When economic times are tough such as the current global financial crisis, we contract (tighten our belts). A good piece of advice she gave me was that when times are prosperous, we should in fact contract our expenditure and not overspend and perhaps not indulge in unnecessary luxuries so that we can save money for the rainy day such as the crisis we have right now. How do we solve these problems, be they financial, health, emotional, etc? What comes to mind for me here is a particular principle of the so-called “Slight Edge”, which if applied, is one of the solutions to our problems, whether health, financial or psychological problems and which I will discuss further down in this article.

Current Uncertain Employment Market and Its Problems

As stated earlier on, many people are being retrenched because of the current global financial crisis. If you have been retrenched, you are shocked as perhaps you thought it will never happen to you. I have been involved with many organisations which were subjected to organisational change during which retrenchments took place. By using the “Slight Edge” principle mentioned earlier on, you could prepare yourself and do simple things to minimise the adverse effects of retrenchment and start again.

Being retrenched is not the same as going on a holiday. It is both physically and mentally different. Holidays have a starting point and a clearly defined finishing point; whereas unemployment has a clearly defined starting point, but a very uncertain finishing point. Hence, each situation should be approached differently. I am endeavoring with this article to introduce things that you could do so as to alleviate the negative impact of being retrenched and becoming unemployed or struggling with other associated problems.

You may have received severance pay that will give you some respite for 2 to 6 months perhaps. However, my experience indicates that the longer you leave things without a commitment to looking for a job, the more difficult it is to take the first step. Being retrenched poses two challenges, ie finding a job, but secondly, also to assess at what you can do with your life in the years ahead. Always remember that life is not a dress-rehearsal, you only get to live once. Moreover, time and money are two precious commodities; both of them are important, but bear in mind that once the time is spent, it's gone and you won't get it back, whereas you can always recoup your financial losses.

When one gets retrenched there are two activities one needs to focus on:

- The first activity covers the stresses that you and your family will have to deal with over the next few weeks or months and the adjustments that will need to be made now that a secure income has gone.
- The second activity involves looking at skills you have and whether they are in demand and if not, you can always take action and re-skill or upgrade your skills. Moreover, it also involves what you can do to keep yourself occupied, interested and productive.

In addition to the above, the areas that will occupy your mind and that of your family, include: feelings, financial matters, finding a job, upgrading your skills, health, education and leisure. You may ask why focus on education and leisure. From a psychological perspective, learning new skills can help in the development of your self worth, increase your job opportunities and provide new interests for your non-work time (eg being a volunteer, joining interests groups, etc). We know that the more skills we have the easier we can adjust to changing situations.

Moreover, being unemployed will probably mean that for a while you will probably have a lot of extra hours on your hands to occupy and need to be productive with this extra time. It will give you the opportunity to develop skills or improve those you have not used for a long time. More importantly, it will keep you physically and mentally ready for your new job. In fact, it is a known fact these days in human resource management that organisations are looking not just for specialist skills but people who are well-rounded (ie not just intellectual abilities as in IQ, but social and emotional intelligence skills as well).

The big question that we will ask when retrenched, concerns how one can move forward. The buzz word here is *change; ie that one needs to take action and change.* However, we know that most people resist change which is a psychological phenomenon.

Resistance to Change

What are the reasons why people resist change when it comes to being retrenched include the following: difficult to break old habits, losing control, feel worn out (being retrenched a few times, poor experiences in the past, etc), feeling insecure (eg fear of failure, threat to skills, lack of information, fear of looking stupid, etc.), suffering loss (eg job loss, status, friends, benefits, etc.), stages of loss that one experiences (shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance)

How to overcome Resistance to Change

In this section, I would like to focus on strategies as to how to embrace change and take action by looking at Slight Edge (SE) Principles. Before we can use SE Principles, lets first look at what SE is.

(a) Slight Edge (SE) Philosophy

- It refers to an understanding of patience.
- It is an understanding of how little steps, compounded over time do make a difference. That is, things you do every single day, the things that don't look dramatic, that don't even look like they matter, do matter. That they not only make a difference ---- **THEY MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE.**
- A few more examples of Slight Edge Philosophy
 - i) Success is the progressive realisation of a worthy ideal
 - ii) Successful people do what unsuccessful people are not willing to do (eg keep on applying for jobs until one is found).
 - iii) There is a natural progression to everything in life: plant, cultivate and harvest. That means when you plant a seed, you have to wait for a while before you can harvest the fruit.
 - iv) Continuous Improvement (Kaizen Principle used by the Japanese: this refers to changing a small fraction of a percentage point in one's performance every day, can compound over 1 year and give you a 25 % productivity improvement). It refers to the compounded effects of small, insignificant and consistent changes every day which could in the long run give you a major change.
- The slight edge is the starting point for every success. Simple little disciplines that, done consistently over time, will add up to the very biggest accomplishments. However, there is a problem: every action that is easy to do is also easy not to do. For example we know we need to apply for a job, easy to do, but we do not do it every day as we find it too hard perhaps or don't feel like it. That is why I like the word action, as action can cure lethargy and fear. Why are these simple yet crucial things easy not to do? **Because if you don't do them, they won't kill you, at least not today. You won't suffer, or fail or blow it ---today. Something is easy not to do when it won't bankrupt you, destroy your career, ruin your relationships or wreck your health ---today. Moreover, not doing it is usually more comfortable than doing it would be. However, that simple, seemingly insignificant error in judgement, compounded over time, will kill you. It will ruin your chances of success.**

This is the Slight Edge. That is the choice you face every day, every hour:

*** A simple, positive action, repeated over time.**

*** A Simple error in judgement, repeated over time.**

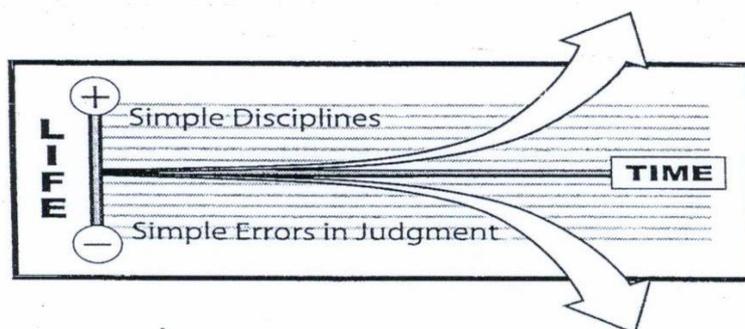
You can always count on the Slight Edge: and unless you make it work for you, the Slight Edge will work against you. Invisible results: you may not see it now, but will further down the track be in a compounded format. For example, if you want a job you need to apply for one regularly every day if you want to succeed. But because you don't feel like it, you won't get the job because you did not put in a consistent effort over time. Always remember that the law of averages apply: if you approach 10 employers, 1 will be perhaps interested in you which is logical. Putting it another way, don't get emotional about things which are logical: if you apply for 10 jobs and if your hit ratio is 1: 10, don't get emotional about the other 9 employers who rejected you.

Further Example: Why do you walk past the exercise bike? Because it's easy. If you don't exercise today, will that kill you? No of course not. You know that if you get your heart rate up, a little over normal for twenty minutes, three times per week, it is good for your health in the long term. It is easy to do. But it is not easy to do. And if you don't do it today, or tomorrow, or the next day, you won't suddenly drop dead and you won't suddenly put on twenty kilogrammes. However, the simple error in judgement compounded over time, will take you down and out.

In terms of job seeking, if you learn a bad habit (SE principle) over time, ie not engaging in active job searching or up-grading your skills, SE will work against you.

(b) The Secret of time and SE

- If you stay on this road long enough (time) you will get the result you seek: instant vs. delayed gratification. That means if you want to get a job, just consistently apply and you will get one: remember the 'law of averages'? The same applies to my weight-loss clients: if they do the small things every day (eg eating small amounts of the right foods), this can compound over time and give them the weight loss they want. It is not a question of your mood or your attitude. And it is not a question of will power. It is a **question of simply knowing: ie if I do simple things every day consistently over time, I will get the result. I believe that many people focus on the process rather than the result: it is frustrating to get a job which is the process, but is it not a great feeling when you finally succeed (end result) in getting the job or losing the weight you want? Putting it another way, the planting and harvest season are not the same. In fact, as humans we want instant results (getting the job quickly) without going through the process and prepare ourselves over time in order to get what we want. In this regard, delayed gratification is perhaps what we need to aim for which is a SE principle.**
- It is precisely those very same, undramatic seemingly **insignificant actions (disciplines)** that, when compounded over time, will dramatically affect how your life turns out. The right choices you make today (eg using your time effectively), compounded over time, will take you higher and higher up the success curve. The wrong choices you make today compounded over time, will absolutely, positively and inevitably take you down and out. That is, you will remain unemployed and stand in the dole queue. To understand the SE philosophy, see the figure below:



I still have many things to say about Slight Edge Principles, which will be outlined in our next Newsletter.

I would like to acknowledge the work of Jeff Olson in his book "The Slight Edge" as background in preparation of this article.

ELKANAH NEWSLETTER

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PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM TO: ELKANAH COUNSELLING, 1 WHITEHORSE ROAD BALWYN 3103