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Specializing in Trauma, Attachment & Adoption

Adoption & Trauma: Removing the Road Block

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As your journey of adoption progresses, you may hear people recommend that one of the things adoptive parents need to do is to “deal with their own issues.” As a neophyte clinician in the mid 1990’s, I was made to do just that by my clinical supervisor while working with traumatized children. After this great experience however, I still left that job feeling that I did not completely understand what my issues were. Where did they come from and why? Why do certain things upset me so much? It was not until years later, with more training and experience, combined with a passion to discover the root of anger and fear, that I finally put the puzzle pieces together. As so it is with great excitement that I share with you what I believe to be the single most important piece of therapeutic information; what I have come to call the *Trauma Roadblock*.

Origins of the Trauma Road Block

It is important to first understand that trauma is a much broader concept that people typically think. It is not just the conscious memory you can access of the bad thing that happened to you when you were little. Trauma is stored in the brain as non-declarative (which means to not state or declare), predominately sensory memory. It is stored as a muscle movement, a taste, a smell, a feeling or a sound. The relatively permanent nature of this type of memory is the reason why for many, it is so hard to overcome a traumatic event. I tell families in my trainings that to get a sense of how powerful non-declarative or procedural memory is, to go home and unlearn riding a bike or playing a musical instrument. So in terms of overcoming trauma, it is more helpful to think of it as an integrative rather than an elimination process.

When a human is born, their capacity to understand abstract concepts is limited and develops over time as they mature. A person’s capacity to understand that an event that occurs to them is not reflective of their

person is limited. It is common place for most if not all people, particularly in the first quarter of their lives until the ego is strong enough, to assign a personal meaning to the events that happen to them. For example, an 8 year old child who is hit by their parents feels that their parents must hit them because they are bad. The child will not be able to abstractly understand that their parents hit them because they (their parents) were angry, out of control and or stressed and it had nothing to do with them. It is important to emphasize to all children and people that the choices we make are simply right or wrong, and not reflective of our heart of character. I am constantly telling traumatized children that their anger or stealing is simply a wrong choice, and that they are still good kids.

The first messages we assign about ourselves come from our early attachment figures. Their capacity to respond to our stress in a sensitive caring way while meeting our needs, helps us assign messages about ourselves that we are safe, can get what we need or that we are alright. This is the foundation upon which everything else is built. As we grow and experience, we often look to the non-verbal responses of others to determine meaning about an event. Does mom frown when I do this or does dad smile when I do that. Once again, we assign meaning about the self in relation to these responses. For many, they receive positive feedback about an event from a parent or a teacher and they assign a positive meaning about the self. Sometimes however, traumatic or difficult events happen and we often assign a negative meaning about the self in relation to that event. Unfortunately, many times the negative thoughts about the self carry more weight than the positive and can have a profound impact on our socio-emotional development. It is these negative thoughts about the self that are the *Trauma Roadblock*.

Why is there a road block? And why do I keep running into it?

Every living organism on this planet has a built in biomechanical mechanism to heal from trauma. If you watch an animal program where a gazelle is chased by a lion, captured, and then the lion lets go and leaves because it is distracted, what does the gazelle do? The subsequent sequence of events the gazelle demonstrates is part of its natural neurological healing mechanism. This is the reason why you don't see depressed gazelles on the savannah's of Africa pining away at the fact that they were chased and almost eaten by a lion. They move on with their lives as if nothing happened. And for them, outside of the continuation of the fight, flight or freeze response, nothing did. The gazelle does not attribute a negative thought about the self in relation to that event as it does not have the cerebral capacity to do so. Humans however do just that. I always tell people that our complex brains as it relates to trauma are both our biggest asset and our worst enemy. The brain however, like the rest of the body, will continually try to heal itself. Pick of a scab from a cut on your arm and another will form as the body continues to try to heal. Neurologically, humans will attempt to heal from the emotional scars they have implanted on their hearts and minds and so will unconsciously put themselves into positions that reflect their predominate negative

thoughts (also known as the *trauma roadblocks*). This occurs because the new situation that reflects the negative thought affords opportunity for the person to respond in a way that they should or would have wanted to in the past.

For example, a woman who experiences domestic violence most likely either had an abusive or absent parent/father. She assigns a meaning about herself in relation to those events such as “I deserve to be hurt.” She then tattoos that meaning deeply onto her heart and mind and subconsciously believes it. Why then does she continually choose to be with abusive men as she gets older? She subconsciously or unconsciously chooses this because her brain is trying to heal itself from that negative message and trauma. Unfortunately, right at the point when she gets ready to say “No more...I do not deserve this,” she picks off the scab once again and starts the process all over again. Many of the children that you will adopt will come into your home with these negative messages such as I am not good enough, I am stupid, I cannot handle this or I cannot trust anyone. For some, like children with attachment disorder, they may even come in with one such as I am in danger. You will often feel stymied that your children always seem to create situations that lead to the same outcome or response from yourself. It is important to remember that this behavior is NOT because the children are malicious in any way but simply a product of their brain’s effort to heal itself.

How to use this information to help my child and myself

The beauty of this design is that first it says that everyone has the built in capacity to heal. The most important factor in whether that process of healing is allowed to take place is the environment the person is in (safe vs. unsafe) and secondly the responses of others to events. When a person gets angry in their present life, it is typically a fear response to perceived emotional threat of the negative cognition coming to the surface. For example, Joey has a negative cognition from childhood of I am stupid. He goes to school and a kid makes fun of him because he got a C on a test. He gets mad and punches the kid because he is afraid of the negative thought and the subsequent feeling coming to the surface. This process is the root of our triggers. The reality is, is that all of these negative thoughts are LIES. Not a single one is true about us no matter what we have done. We simply make wrong choices sometimes. When parents and children can understand the lies they have been telling themselves, they then can free themselves from the vicious cycle they may have been living in for many years.

So here is what you do for yourself first:

1) Think about the top 3 worst things that ever happened to you. Most often these occur earlier in our lives

before late adolescence.

2) Now ask this question: “When that happened to me or I witnessed that – What did/does it mean about me?”

3) Then answer this question with an I statement such as I am stupid or I am not good enough etc. (for a list of negative and positive cognitions see my website (www.allabouttrauma.com)).

4) Recognize this negative thought is a LIE.

5) Separate past from present. When you start to feel frustrated about a current experience try to identify the negative thought that is the root of this feeling, again recognize that lie in the moment, and then tell yourself the TRUTH which is the opposite of the lie. For example for the lie of I am worthless...tell the truth to yourself of I am worthwhile.

Now for your child:

1) Do step 1- 4 for your child in your own head or with you partner. Be aware of any negative cognitions your child may be carrying from their lives before they came to live with you. You can sometimes get them by analyzing the documented child history, and sometimes from the situation that precedes an anger episode.

2) Combat these lies every day.

3) Turn off the television as it will reinforce the negative thoughts.

4) Paste the positive thoughts (opposite the negative) in a mirror and have the child read it everyday when they wake up.

5) Read the positive truths about each other as a family together.

6) Separate past from present for them. For example if their negative cognition is I am in danger, don't be afraid to hold them when they are calm enough while calmly repeating “you are safe now.”

Tell them the truth everyday, multiple times a day. You could never tell them the truth enough. Most of all, separate out their behavior from who they are by telling them the truth while letting them know their choices, and sometimes as adults our for that matter, were simply wrong. Free them from the lies they tell themselves and they will thrive.