Excerpt from eBook 1

The Chronic Illness & Trauma Connection

An Overview

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Chronic Illness Trauma Studies
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v. July 26, 2018

Chapter 7. Stories of Healing

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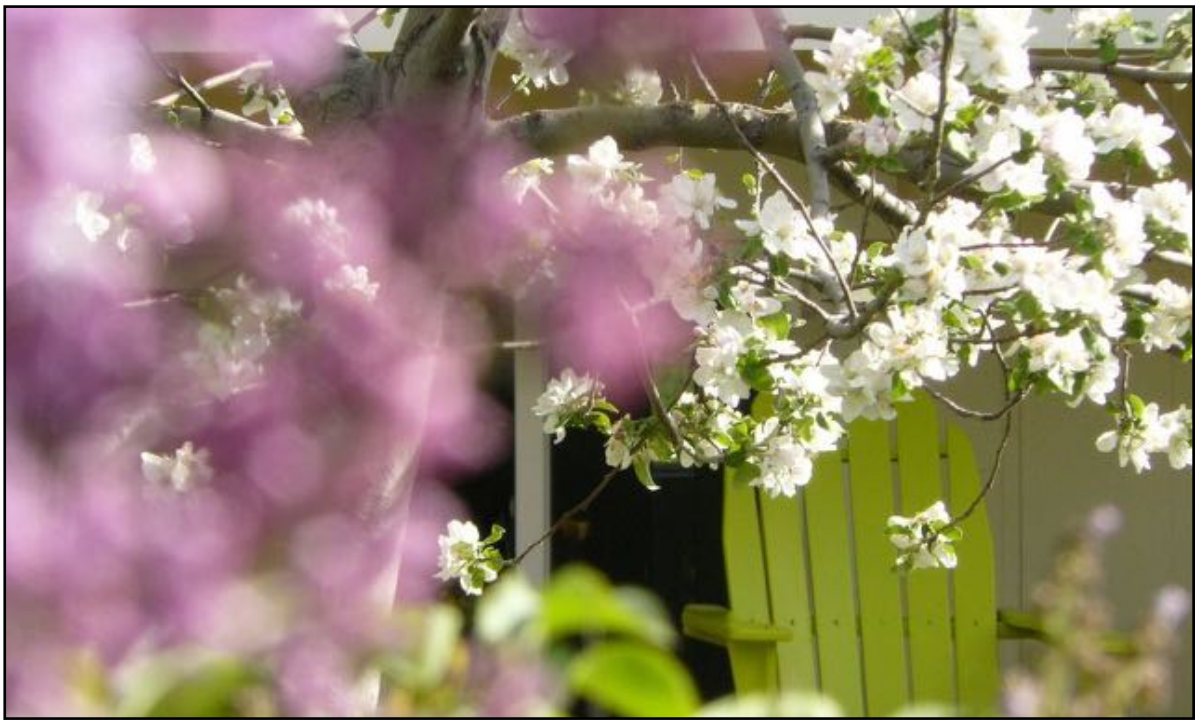
Introduction



The following stories and research offer examples of how adverse life events (ALEs) affect risk for chronic illness.

They also show how healing the effects of trauma can actually improve health.

As you become more familiar and gain an increasing understanding of trauma and its subtleties that we tend to overlook - in medicine, in society, in our culture - you will begin to recognize ALEs and their effects more easily.

You will start to make sense of events that “didn’t seem that bad” in your life and in other people’s lives, but that may still have influenced and shaped your health.

Such events could include having had a difficult birth, having been bullied as a child or told you were “the problem;” whether you were abused physically, emotionally, or sexually; were hospitalized, had a fall or other accident, and more.

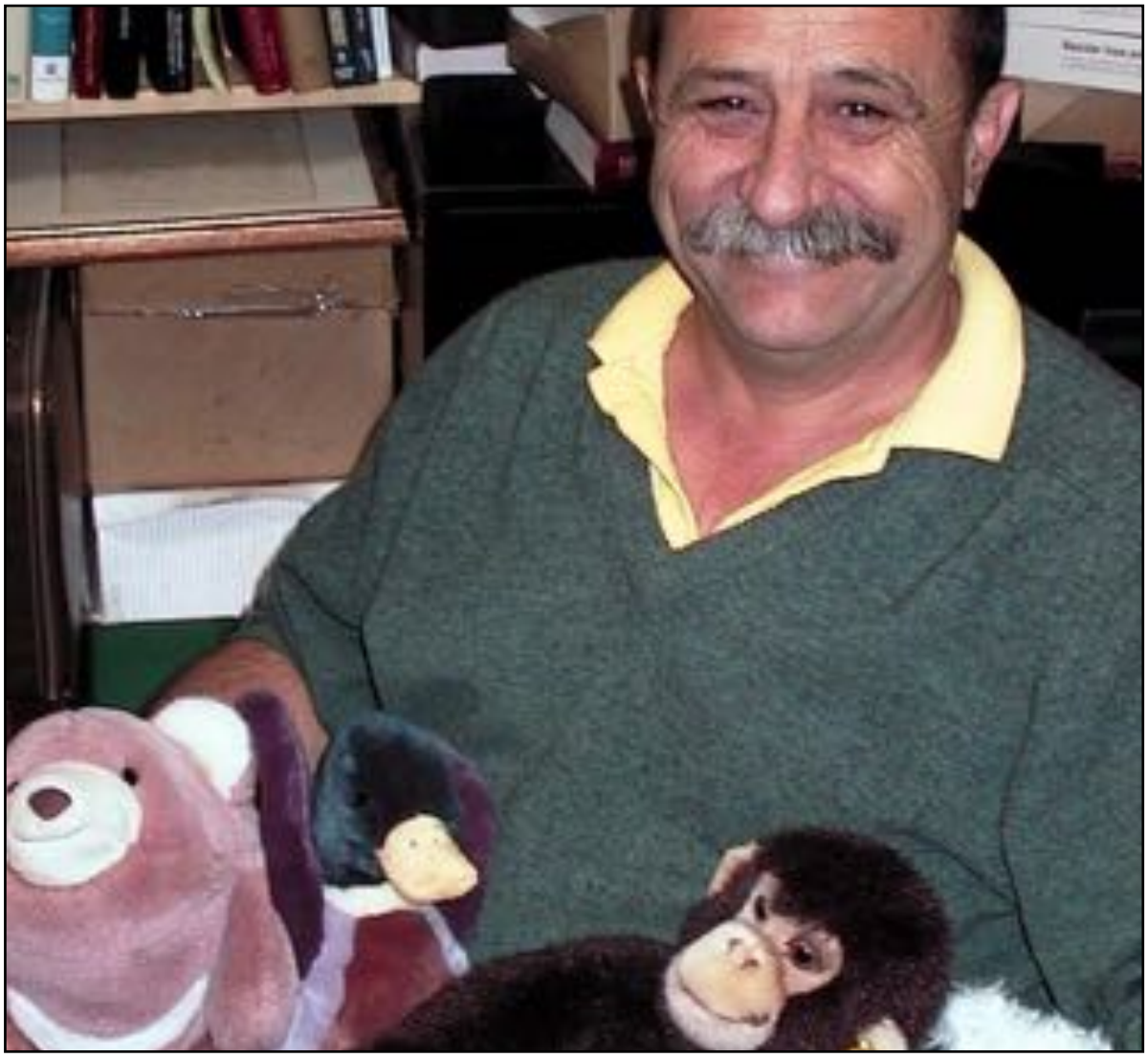
In the following personal stories and research, you will find examples of people who have decreased their symptoms, learned to manage symptoms in more effective ways, or who have greatly improved and sometimes even recovered from a chronic illness.

Over time, you will also begin to recognize patterns and symptoms, as well as examples of healing in the news, on TV, in movies and in those around you.

These journeys inform our own.

They are paths that offer inspiration and show us that there really are new, powerful, and informed ways of treating and healing chronic illness.

Asthma: Tony Madrid's Approach With Kids



Psychologist Tony Madrid has discovered that a significant number of children with asthma have experienced some form of trauma in early life.

Their asthma is often linked to difficulties mothers or babies experienced during pregnancy.

Trauma and stress experienced in pregnancy can interrupt a mother's natural and innate ability to bond with her baby.

Separation of a mother from her baby at birth can also interrupt this bond.

What Dr. Madrid found was that emotional or physical separation can occur from all kinds of events that take place outside of a mother's control.

Tony also discovered was that when he treats mothers for difficulties they encountered during pregnancy, in labor or when giving birth, or just before the onset of their childrens' symptoms their childrens' asthma improves.

In fact, it often resolves.

This is an example of a very direct connection between early trauma, a frequently serious chronic illness and the power of trauma resolution.

Recent studies have also shown that such events alter our genes, so it's not psychological - neither for mothers, nor for babies.

You can learn more about Tony's research and treatment approach in a post on my blog, on his website "Asthma Busters," in his book (Madrid, 2010), as well as in his research studies (Madrid, 2005 & 2006).

Autoimmune Disease: Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Journalist Donna Jackson Nakazawa is the author of Childhood Disrupted*: How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology, and How You Can Heal* (2015).

In her book, Donna describes the science of stress and a focus on "toxic stress," which is a term used for trauma in childhood.

Her curiosity stems from her own experiences with life-altering and debilitating autoimmune and other chronic diseases. These include:

- Guillain Bare Syndrome, which left her with numbness and weakness that made it difficult to conduct daily activities, climb stairs and be an involved parent
- a serious blood disorder, which her father also had, suggesting an underlying genetic factor
- thyroiditis
- chronic fatigue
- seizures
- severe eczema (an inflammatory skin disorder)
- a long-standing heart arrhythmia that required the placement of a pacemaker in her 20s.
- irritable bowel syndrome, headaches & other symptoms

Donna first embarked on her journey after an unexpected encounter with a new doctor, who asked her if anything significant had happened in her childhood.

In asking this question, her doctor had been acting on information garnered from a Kaiser-CDC study of over 17,000 adults finding that exposure to 10 specific types of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) significantly increase risk for chronic physical and autoimmune illnesses of all kinds.

Her doctor was referring to the hundreds of ACE studies that have been conducted since the first study in 1998 (You can learn

more about ACEs in chapter 5 of this book as well as in a detailed post on my blog).

The question took Donna by surprise.

Like most of us - and most health care providers even today in 2018, 20 years after the first ACE study - she had never heard of ACEs.

Her doctor's question, however, helped Donna begin to recognize just how deeply she had been affected by her father's unexpected death when she was 12 years old. The loss of a parent is one of the types of trauma evaluated in the ACE study and found to increase risk for chronic illness later in life.

Over the course of a year Donna explored practices in mindfulness, meditation and yoga along with other approaches to healing.

The realization about the extend of the impact from her father's death as well as the tools she began to implement, started to change Donna's life - and her health.

She learned that being left to her own devices to essentially fend for herself from the ages of 12 to 18 had been a significant experience of loss and trauma in her life.

As the year progressed, Donna began to feel more peace and joy in her life.

She became more compassionate with herself.

Her markers of inflammation decreased from 96, which is severe, to 33.

Her blood cells began to normalize even though she had the same problems her father had had.

Science is showing us that even though genetic factors can be transmitted across generations to affect health, these genes must be turned on or off to exert their effects. A

dverse life events are one of the factors that turn genes on and off.

Healing the effects of trauma and stress are tools that can reverse these epigenetic changes and that can sometimes make genes inactive and stop their negative effects.

Donna regained her ability to climb stairs and take walks.

Her baseline levels of energy improved.

The effects of her autoimmune disease, which left her with limitations following her episodes of paralysis, began to reverse.

Donna's book provides an exquisite example of how healing the effects of trauma in childhood can lead to changes in health, including chronic illness.

You can read a synopsis of Donna's book on ACEs too High as well as the outpouring of comments it engendered from people in all stages of healing who realized that their health had also been affected by unrecognized trauma.

Multiple Sclerosis: Ann Boroch

Ann Boroch, a naturopath who cured herself of multiple sclerosis (MS) and now teaches, treats and helps others do the same, has a primary focus on diet.

In her book she also mentions having addressed the effects of childhood trauma associated with her parents' divorce and other challenges (Boroch, 2015). Loss of a parent through divorce is an adverse childhood experience (ACE), and known to increase risk of chronic illness later in life.

Dr. Boroch's story is another example of how resolving traumatic events may be an important component of healing from chronic illness. And that there are many approaches to healing, including diet.

Parkinson's Disease: John Pepper

In his book on the plasticity of the brain, psychiatrist Norman Doidge describes how World War II veteran John Pepper has been managing his symptoms of Parkinson's through a program devised by John himself (Doidge, 2015).

John has a significant history of multiple types of trauma beyond his service in WWII, which may have affected his risk of developing the disease.

His approach has been to get active and to "mobilize."

He's learned how to how to rest, how not to push too hard in his regimen, and how to keep his stress levels down.

John Pepper's approach has also involved becoming very mindful - of his gait, of patterns associated with his tremors, of

how his body works or does not work well - and to note each of these issues with focused concentration.

Mobilizing and mindfulness are also traditional tools in the healing of trauma.

John Pepper's process has been sufficient to maintain many of his abilities to move, see, and hear rather than becoming immobilized or "frozen," which is one of the hallmarks of Parkinson's disease and which becomes more prominent over time.

This state of freeze in Parkinson's may very well be an expression of unresolved trauma.

When John has had to slow down or stop his activities due to an acute illness or injury, his symptoms have worsened. Resuming his practices has, more than once, enabled him to regain function again and have thus reversed symptoms.

John's story is an example of the malleability of our brains, nervous systems and bodies.

As a reflection on how much our bodies can change and improve according to the principles of brain plasticity that are now being discovered.

It's also a powerful example of how many ways there are to slow the worsening of a disease. to heal and to even reverse symptoms.

John’s improvements have continued despite having had Parkinson’s for 50 years.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS): Dan Neuffer

In his book, CFS Unravelled, Dan Neuffer describes how the onset of his symptoms of chronic fatigue syndrome were triggered by a vaccine (2013).

He had experienced a series of difficult events before that, which included nearly losing his wife during the birth of their son.

After 5 years of symptoms that worsened and eventually left him unable to work despite many forms of treatment, Dan began his own personal research into potential causes of CFS.

He found that the myriad symptoms and biochemical abnormalities associated with chronic fatigue seemed to link to a common source.

This source was an underlying change in autonomic nervous system functioning.

In other words - Dan's discovery was that his brain was driving his symptoms of ME/CFS.

By following principles he discovered, Dan made a full recovery in about 18 months. He is back to working full time, being an involved parent and successfully engaging in sports and exercise without negative repercussions.

He has also successfully applied what he's learned to helping others recover from ME/CFS.

Dan has written about his research and findings and outlines his recommendations for recovery in his book.

These can seem plain or ordinary at first glance (diet, meditation, stress reduction, etc) but his critical realization has been that healing takes place by reducing the brain's states of heightened reactivity and sensitivity.

In other words, it's not just about reducing inflammation through diet or mindbody practices, but also about working with nervous system perceptions of threat.

Dan’s discoveries align with the principles presented here, which draw from the science explaining how changes in the nervous system result from the effects of unresolved ALEs.

Dan also mentions that important triggers include the common experience so many of us with chronic illness have - the fears associated with symptoms as well as with having to manage our care in a medical system that is often unhelpful, disbelieving or that provides treatment strategies that make things worse instead of better.

As I’ve emphasized throughout my ebook, the links between trauma and altered brain function are not all in our heads or the result of a little too much stress.

Similarly, the link between trauma and CFS and other chronic illnesses is not psychological.

It’s in our nervous systems.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease (Crohn's, Ulcerative Colitis): Rachel Remen

Rachel Remen is a pediatrician and faculty at Stanford who became a counselor so she could truly listen to her patients and help them heal in a different way.

She has specialized in working with people with cancer and other life-threatening illnesses, as well as with physicians suffering from burnout.

Rachel developed inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) in the 1940s at the age of 15, when life expectancy for people with IBD was 40.

Her 1996 book, "Kitchen Table Wisdom," presents a moving collection of short stories about healing.

In her book, we learn about a way of being that Rachel gradually developed with her patients and clients and, eventually, with herself. It is gentle and loving, compassionate and respectful. And it is based in curiosity and nonjudgment.

One particular theme that emerges throughout Kitchen Table Wisdom is the feeling of isolation and aloneness.

This is also common in trauma, which ruptures our boundaries, our sense of self, and our ability to connect.

Rachel's stories offer examples of how this can change to allow a new sense of connection, support and resource.

This is similar to what Donna Jackson Nakazawa learned in her year of practices that began to reduce her symptoms of autoimmune and other chronic illnesses.

You'll get a sense of the kinds of transformation that can arise from the ordinary as old wounds heal in this kind of nurturing,

attuning relationship with oneself and with others. And she's experienced many ALEs, including being born prematurely.

While Dr. Remen doesn't talk about trauma as a risk factor for chronic illness nor work with her health from this particular perspective, many of her tools support healing of the nervous system and of trauma. You can learn morea bout the nervous system in trauma in my post The Essential Guide to Chronic Illness, Trauma and the Nervous System.

Through her process of softening and learning how to listen to herself, Rachel's own symptoms of severe IBD also improved.

They decreased significantly with time, and she was still conducting workshops in 2017 when I wrote the first draft of this ebook. She was approaching 80 at the time.

In Conclusion

The stories I have shared offer inspiration.

They also offer a glimpse of what is possible when looking at chronic illness from a trauma perspective.

They also reaffirm that there are many ways of healing from chronic illness and other health conditions. Most approaches are also part of healing when using a trauma perspective.

You can download the full PDF of this free ebook #1 "An Overview of the Chronic Illness and Trauma Connection") and others on my downloads page or browse through my blog Chronic Illness Trauma Studies.