

Chapter 4. Catharsis

As we saw in our chapter on anger, catharsis has been largely discredited in regard to its role as a consistent technique for managing everyday anger. Nonetheless, it still has a role as a means of reducing the rage which accompanies victimization in the face of massive injustice and betrayal, as a method of gaining relief from the pressure of accumulated vulnerable feelings such as grief and fear, and perhaps as a means of balancing an excessive tendency to suppress and submit. When approaching feelings, we have twin goals. We must control our feelings in order to prevent excessive acting out, but we must also express our feelings in order to prevent excessive suppression and accumulation of feelings. A controlled expression of feelings is usually ideal, but in some cases, a history of excessive control, or excessive expression of feelings begs for the development of the opposing skill. In cases of extreme suppression of intense emotion, as in a child who is betrayed via sexual abuse or extreme physical abuse by a parent, anger can accumulate to the point of suppressed rage. In these cases, a cathartic release of such rage, if approached in a healthy manner, and accompanied by expression of underlying vulnerable feelings, is often essential if one is to move beyond the gravitational pull and victimhood of such a trauma. The underlying, primary vulnerable feelings, which likewise demand expression if one is to attain internal relief, may include sadness, feeling betrayed or abandoned, shame, guilt, horror and fear, confusion, etc.

Thus, a second primary goal when attempting to resolve trauma involves expressing the emotions attached to the trauma until they are reduced to manageable proportions. This requires us to strategically approach the horrible memories and feelings created by the trauma, though we can now do so armored with containment techniques to distance ourselves from the trauma when necessary. Imagine that your mind is a magnet, and that your traumatic memories and feelings are hundreds of metal filings that cling tightly to your mind, waiting to be shaken loose. Expressing the intense feelings associated with your trauma memories is extremely uncomfortable at the moment, but is a means of gradually breaking free of the hold that these memories exert upon you. Alternatively, imagine that your mind is a closed container, with a horizontal dividing line that separates the conscious mind above from the unconscious (typically inaccessible) and subconscious (accessible, but currently suppressed) mind below. When something triggers your trauma memories, your subconscious (and sometimes your unconscious) trauma memories and feelings surface into your conscious mind. You may dwell upon these memories for awhile, while feeling inundated emotionally, as these memories and feelings swirl around your conscious mind - until you are able to contain them by distracting yourself or otherwise suppressing them back down into your subconscious mind. The problem is that the volume of your subconscious mind has not decreased, and that you still carry the full content of your trauma. Your mind needs a chimney, a means of expelling some of this content in order to lighten your load. Otherwise, the total amount of your emotional distress has not changed; a portion of it has simply risen temporarily into your conscious mind, and then returned in its original quantity to your subconscious/unconscious mind. Your

unconscious mind uses dreams and nightmares as a small chimney, working through traumatic memories and feelings outside of your awareness as you sleep. However, this is a small chimney that operates slowly, largely outside of your awareness, beyond your conscious control. Your conscious mind contains a larger chimney, which is potentially under your conscious control. The flue can be opened in order to release bothersome feelings as if they were poisonous fumes, by intentionally expressing such feelings. The net result is that the volume of your trauma gradually decreases as it is released from the mind. But for this to take place, you cannot simply think about your trauma; the feelings and images associated with your trauma must be expressed externally, and export a product into the external world. This may involve tears, angry noise, ink on a piece of paper in your journal, crayon marks or paint strokes on a canvas, speech as you talk to a friend, blows to a pillow or to a picture of your perpetrator as you pound with your fists, or some other tangible product of your emotional expression. As the smoke leaves the chimney, the fire within gradually subsides. The key is to wisely control both the flue and the barrier between the conscious and subconscious minds, expressing and expelling traumatic residue through the chimney when feeling strong enough to intentionally do so, while suppressing it back down into the subconscious mind when it is wiser to temporarily restabilize oneself.

The word “catharsis” stems from the Greek word for cleansing, or purification. Josef Breuer, the Austrian physician who initially mentored Sigmund Freud, later coauthored *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) with him, focusing on the treatment of “Anna O,” who herself referred to Breuer’s “cathartic method” as “chimney sweeping” or the “talking cure.” At the time, what we now call “conversion symptoms,” that is, physical symptoms with a purely psychological cause, were referred to as “hysteria.” Breuer suspected that Anna’s apparently physical symptoms, such as a cough after caring for her father during his fatal tuberculosis, and paralysis of her arm, as well as an inability to drink water, were psychologically based. He found that such symptoms decreased or were eliminated after she discussed memories of events that seemed to coincide with the initial appearance of these symptoms. To be successful, the cathartic method required discussion of the triggering incident in detail, as well as the expression of intense emotions (e.g., via crying) while remembering the event. Following Breuer’s model, Freud later encouraged patients to relive traumatic incidents under hypnosis while expressing their feelings intensely, referring to this act of emotional recollection as “abreaction.” He hypothesized that psychic energy was diverted and employed in the repression of such traumatic memories, and viewed catharsis as means of unveiling these memories, releasing the bound up energy, and thereby reducing the problematic symptoms. Freud eventually found success using this method without hypnosis as well, and eventually referred to catharsis as the immediate precursor, and part of the “nucleus” of psychoanalysis. Two elements of catharsis appear to be essential, emotional discharge and recovered consciousness. This combination is reflected in the American Psychological Association (2007) definition of catharsis as “the discharge of affects connected to a traumatic event that had previously been repressed by bringing these events back into consciousness and reexperiencing them.” The emotional discharge component is based on the hydraulic model

involving fluid flowing through a system. If blocked, the accumulated fluid/emotion can create pressure in the system, requiring venting if tension is to be released and normal energy flow (emotional spontaneity) is to be restored. Likewise, everyday experience tells us that crying is often effective in restoring emotional equilibrium. While the emotional expression component of catharsis is typically emphasized, the cognitive awareness component is equally important. It is noteworthy in this regard that current exposure techniques for reduction of trauma symptoms involve deliberate recollection of suppressed memories, which from an ego state therapy perspective, are then reintegrated into consciousness. Thus, there is significant overlap between therapeutic concepts and methods involving exposure, catharsis, and integration. Inner child work, a well known ego state approach to recovery, involves reintegration of the dissociated inner child or authentic self. As Bradshaw notes in *Homecoming* (1990), "original pain work" requires the reexperiencing of early traumas and expression of the emotions that were repressed during that trauma. He adds (p. 76), "The good news is that original pain work involves nature's own healing process. *Grief is the healing feeling*. We will heal naturally if we are just allowed to grieve." While catharsis as a consistent technique for expressing everyday anger has rightfully been challenged, the grief process is a more accepted cathartic process, with demonstrated utility in resolving various losses, including the loss of loved ones and the loss of one's essential selfhood.

While common sense tells us that crying can be a cleansing grief experience, we also know that unending tears, or violent expressions of anger carry danger at the other extreme. Again, there are two goals here, emotional expression, and emotional control, with the fusion of these two goals, controlled emotional expression, being the ultimate goal while pursuing recovery via catharsis. As Ross notes in *The Trauma Model* (2000), "intense recollection" is likely to be more healing than abreaction during trauma recovery work. Abreactions, involving intense, unrestrained discharge of feelings, are viewed by Ross as acting out rather than working through one's trauma. This is particularly the case when anger or rage is involved. Abreactions can also be destabilizing, in some cases because this extreme version of catharsis can produce a regressive, dissociative reliving of a trauma, as if one were still trapped in the past traumatic moment, without being grounded in or aware of one's safety in the present. Telling one's trauma story, intensely, but while fully grounded and safe in the present, particularly to a trusted human being, but also via journaling and other cathartic techniques, combines cathartic healing and safety. There is an optimal distance that must be maintained from the trauma if you are to avoid getting lost/dissociated within the trauma. As we noted during the section on grounding in our chapter on containment, a focus upon the differences between one's present situation and past, aided by grounding cues, can help maintain awareness of the present, and a feeling of safety, while emotionally recalling the past.

Just as the trauma was originally experienced very intensely, the expression of traumatic emotions will need to eventually be intense, though as we have seen, such intensity can be approached safely, in a grounded, controlled and gradual manner. The mild end of the emotional intensity spectrum might include journaling in which you write about your traumatic memories and feelings, talk to a safe friend

or therapist about them, or depict them on paper with crayons. Moving up this intensity dimension, you might write an unsent letter to your perpetrator. At the upper extreme of the spectrum, you may confront your perpetrator via an empty chair technique, as if (s)he was locked behind bars of a jail cell, forced to listen to you. Alternatively, you might draw a picture of your perpetrator, place it on top of a pillow, and strike at once, then twice, than five times, deliberately maintaining control of your anger as you gradually find yourself capable of verbally and physically releasing your fury without losing control, expressing feelings that you could not safely express at the time of your trauma. Keep in mind, however, that while anger is an understandable response to massive injustice, anger is typically a secondary emotion, concealing underlying vulnerable emotions. Grief in particular, involving sadness regarding your various losses, is likely to underlie such anger. The ability to get in touch with and express such grief is at least as important as expressing anger regarding injustice. Likewise, the ability to nurture the part of yourself that suffered through the trauma, e.g., via inner child work, is a means of soothing yourself as you endure and express the distressing feelings associated with your trauma. You cannot change what happened during your trauma, but you can change how you relate to your trauma, and to yourself as a victim of this trauma.

As discussed above, the intensity of catharsis is potentially dangerous, and can result in a dissociative reexperiencing of the trauma without adequate grounding in the safety of the present when such approaches are not paced sufficiently to maintain control. Accordingly, such techniques involving extremely intense emotional expression are best pursued under the safe guidance of a therapist, who can help you maintain control by pacing the exercise, keeping you grounded, and helping you nurture yourself through the process. Nonetheless, an intense expression of traumatic emotions is eventually necessary if the raw intensity of your traumatic feelings is to be markedly reduced. The mild shaking of the magnet may release some of the smaller filings, but the larger ones will require much more vigorous shaking. This is not to say that the magnet will ever be completely clean. Even after extensive therapy, clients continue to carry their traumatic memories, and find their residual feelings being triggered. However, as you increasingly express and expel such feelings, your load gradually lightens, and as you develop your containment techniques, you learn how to more effectively control what remains. And, as noted in a separate chapter, as you develop your self nurturance skills, you will gradually learn how to soothe yourself, providing your traumatized self with the supportive embrace that was likely missing when you endured the trauma in the first place. As a result, you gradually find yourself overwhelmed by such memories and feelings less frequently and less intensely, and having more control over this lightened load when it is triggered. The key is to gradually combine and improve your containment, self nurturance, and expressive skills to the point where you have substantial deliberate control over the speed of the roller coaster. Returning to the metaphor of a wise general, pace your recovery, advancing via catharsis and exposure when you are feeling strong, but retreating via containment skills when feeling overwhelmed, while consistently nurturing yourself along the way.