



Building Resilience and Resisting Trauma at Work

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on materials and experiences drawn from the guide that accompanies our Resilience-Based Trauma-Training clinic © Bill Cropper 2017

Trauma can happen slowly. Or suddenly, in seconds. But its effects can last much longer. Whether it's a natural disaster, a work-related incident, physical or emotional upsets, or any number of workplace woes we find overwhelming, trauma can keep on triggering distressing physical, emotional and mental reactions that can play havoc with our nervous system, make life hard-going, our behaviour erratic, and our relationships very difficult to manage...

I've been exceptionally fortunate over the past year to work with a unit that cares deeply about what happens to its people, and wanted to do something constructive to help them confront the reality of work-based trauma and its impacts.

What resulted from our collaboration on this troubling topic was the development of a program for supervisors and staff I called *Resilience-Based Trauma-Training*, along with the parallel production of a pocket-guide on building resilience and handling trauma at work. So I thought I'd share some of the insights and self-help formulas we've worked up together...

Trauma and its Effects

Trauma's an intense, sometimes seemingly uncontrollable, set of acute stress-reactions to single or serial events that are distressing, disturbing and unexpected. They're:

- ...generated by biologically-based, mainly involuntary, self-survival impulses that are automatic.
- ...the natural protective response of our nervous system to threats we experience as hazardous, anxiety-creating or life-threatening either to ourselves or to others.
- ...not abnormal, weak or wrong which is one of the first attitudinal hurdles we have to get over.

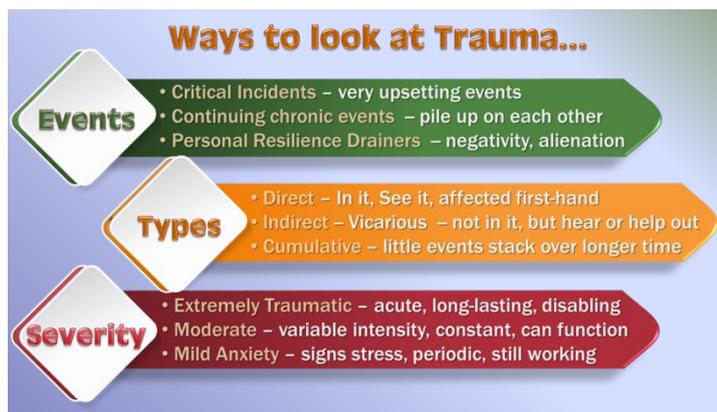
Trauma gets our bodily alarms going, and it can keep them going long after an actual event has passed. Our nervous system has trouble getting back in balance, because our brain keeps ringing '*Amygdala alarms*' long after the event's over and things should have settled. *It gets locked in the 'on' position* – stuck repeatedly replaying the same loops of alarm, adding-on extra stress and piling on the chemical cocktails our Amygdala deals out, as it refuses to switch-off.



Trauma ignored, concealed and left to fester untreated, can damage us and others around us. Apart from straight-out incidents, accidents or near-misses, there's many other sources of trauma, at work and in our lives that can affect our mental or physical well-being and emotional balance.

Trauma events are more than just run-of-the-mill stressful. We start to feel our everyday world around us is unsafe, threatening or dangerous – even if it's not in reality.

To get an idea of what this feels like, think of any natural disaster, or how terrorism has made normal surroundings such as subways, shopping centres, airports, sporting fixtures, concerts – feel potentially unsafe and fraught with hidden dangers.



Trauma can come from a one-off event. Or it can build up slowly from an accumulation of repeated events over time.

This diagram shows different ways you can look at trauma through the lenses of kind of event, type of trauma, or it's severity or impact. Whichever way you see it:

- Trauma disrupts our body's ability to cope with churned-up emotions or chilling thoughts such events bring up, and frequently bring back, for us.

- Trauma takes many different forms. An event that one of us finds traumatic may not be so much for another person.
- No matter how disturbing, it isn't the event in itself that says whether someone may be traumatised. It's what each individual makes out of it and how our nervous system reacts to it.

The effect of trauma-inducing events isn't always apparent. You may not always notice stress effects straightaway. Some of us won't have any at all. Some of us can seem unaffected afterwards. But we all know others who've picked-up some trauma, even if it didn't come out until much later. Trauma has lots of repercussions:

- It can leave us feeling drained, despairing, despondent, disconnected, depressed or debilitated.
- It can drain our reserves of resilience and our ability to function effectively at home and at work.
- It can affect us emotionally, physically or intellectually. It can impact how we behave, how well we get along with others, even how safe we feel from day to day.
- And of course it can affect how well we cope and continue to perform our jobs.

Sadly, trauma can also shorten lives, leaving us more open to contracting lots of different diseases and conditions. Let's get this in perspective though...

- Trauma and stress are normal things we all deal with – and handling them is a natural part of being alive, being human and handling 'bumps'.
- Everyone undergoes degrees of stress and trauma in life and work, where our body's nervous system ramps up to deal with a threat. Afterwards, it usually goes back down. But it doesn't happen that way for all of us.



Too much stress can be bad for us, whether brought on by exposure to too many Anxiety-Creating Events (ACEs), too much distress or pressure at work or home, or after attending, or even hearing second-hand about a disturbing event.

- When we go from ordinary stress to extreme distress, we feel the effects bodily, mentally, emotionally and behaviour-wise.
- We can have vivid and terrifying flashbacks...

- We may become over-alert or hyper-vigilant to potential threat-risks around us, which makes our brain too quick to switch on our fight, flee or freeze responses and then too slow to turn them off again. *That's trauma. It's nervous system overload.*

Resilience and Trauma



Resilience and trauma are two sides of the same coin. As I see it, building resilience, and managing to retain your reserves of it, is our main trauma-resistance and recovery strategy.

Resilience can act like a 'stress-buffer'. It helps us withstand stressful events – big or small – to soldier on, or adapt, rather than surrender. It's what helps us handle life's trials, tests and setbacks, whether they're big or small.

How much resilience we have in our reserve tanks can be an indicator of how readily we can get back to a 'steady state' after the air's been knocked out of us. It helps us take knocks, come back strong, try again and take positive action.

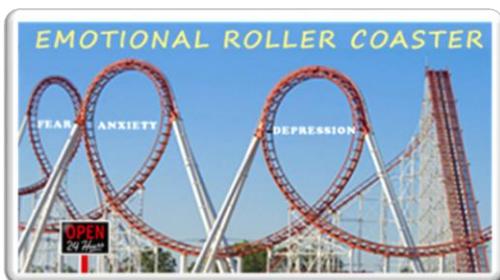
- As you know, it's often called the 'bounce-back' emotion. But that's not quite right. We won't always bounce-back to the same place – we adjust instead. Even if your life-circumstances change as a result of a traumatic event, resilience helps you adapt.
- Resilience isn't something you're either born with or not. We all have it to different degrees though some seem to have more of it than others at different times.
- All of us have in-built ability to get back to being able to function after adversity or trauma, adapt and continue to engage and cope with normal life.

Being resilient doesn't mean coasting through life without registering stress or pain. You can't. No-one can. It's part of life. We feel grief, sadness and many other upsetting feelings as a result of enduring loss, hardship, adversity.

One defining aspect of resilience is it really only becomes noticeable when we face up to traumatic events. It's harder to see while things are going well. It's easier when we go through things we wish hadn't happened.

How much resilience you have also harks back to other emotional traits such as self-belief, self-efficacy, optimism, focus, hope and happiness. The good news is resilience skills can be learned. We can all learn ways to train our brain to strengthen resilience – to get more in the tank to cope with those hard times and unanticipated incidents, accidents and emergencies.

The Resilience Zone



The basic brain science behind threat-management is that our sympathetic nervous system winds you up to face it. Your parasympathetic system then follows-up with a bodily wind-down after the alert's called off.

That's the usual rhythm of things if you're not over-stressed or traumatised. Your nervous system is cleverly designed to reset itself back to a balanced state after a traumatic event. *This is known as your 'Resilience Zone' – and we can all get access to ours.*

If you're inside your resilience zone, you can mostly handle daily stresses and challenges life throws at you. No real problem. We're emotionally balanced. We have the capacity to focus, self-control and think clearly. We're also more capable of managing our stress more positively whether it's chronic, cumulative or incident-based. We're more able to get off, and stay off, trauma's emotional roller-coaster...

- ❑ But sometimes our bodies get out of emotional balance or the stress piles up too much. When a trauma-event turns out to be too hard to handle, we overload.
- ❑ Our 'wind-up-wind-down' rhythm gets disrupted so your nervous system has trouble resetting itself. When this happens, you can get...
 - *Stuck in the high zone?* Your nervous system goes on high alert. You arc-up. Heart races. Breaths get faster and shallow. Automatically, your fight, flee or freeze response kicks in. Your Amygdala senses danger and there's not much you can do about that in the moment.
 - *Stuck in the low zone?* If your body can't put the brake on, the trauma-event or threat lasts too long, or your body continues to run in the high zone too long, you can lapse into the low zone. You feel numb, depressed, disconnected, despondent, dissociated and fatigued. Instead of arc-up, you now clam-up, go into your corner and disconnect.
 - *Stuck in between somewhere?* While we might go high-zone hyper or low-zone downer, sometimes you might find yourself swinging between the high zone and the low zone like a roller coaster.



If you end up in the high or low zone. or somewhere in-between, it means you've been knocked out and locked out of your Resilience Zone you need to be in to reset nervous systems and resettle emotions.

Knowing about the *Resilience Zone* gives you a model that enables you to understand what goes on in the event of potentially traumatic situations and how we typically react that can become a first line of defence and self-help. Anyone can get bumped out of their RZ if life's too stressful or events are too traumatic. Many of us manage to get back in it on our own.

But all of us can benefit learning a few extra strategies to make getting back in a little bit easier. I call these *Trauma Resistance Management Strategies*. Their aim is to reduce trauma by expanding your Resilient Zone so you spend more time in it and less time out of it.

Trauma Self-Help Tools



Professional trauma counselling may be imperative for many people to help them over early hurdles. In the end though, trauma is what happens to you on the inside. *So it relies on what you can do to help yourself too. There's a lot of benefit in working-up your own trauma-resistance management strategies.*

My *Resilience-Based Trauma Training* clinic revolves around 5 Trauma-Resisters and 5 Resilience-Builders.

- They're all brain-science backed, working on the close connection between mind and body to settle and regain control of disturbing thoughts, feelings or sensations.
- Each one helps people monitor what their nervous system's doing by focusing on thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations.
- The aim is to help people spend more time in their resilience zone, less time out of it and be able to get back in it quicker if they notice they've been knocked out of it.

Exhibit: Brief outline of the 5 Trauma-Resisters (TR) and 5 Resilience-Builders (RB)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ TR 1: Re-Placing is tracking upset, anxious sensations in your body and replacing them with feelings of balance, well-being, calm or even just neutrality. ▶ TR 2: Re-Grounding is any direct contact you make between body and ground (or other solid surface) that helps you stay centred in the present moment ▶ TR 3: Recollecting covers re-telling your trauma-story in a way that helps reframe troubling thoughts and also life-supports that are strengthening or restoring. ▶ TR 4: Re-enacting is being conscious of automatic body movement you make as you recollect your story – those that wind you up and those that calm down ▶ TR 5: Refocusing is practising being able to mindfully shift focus from feelings, thoughts or sensations that alarm or distress, to those that are neutral or calming | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ RB-1: Positive Outlook. Resilience and positivity are related. While trauma can erode it, positive outlook is a proven plus in helping people handle it better ▶ RB-2: Minding Thoughts. Distressing thoughts and images after a trauma-event wind us up. Replacing with more neutral, calm or positive ones can help ▶ RB-3: Minding Emotions. Trauma is an emotional reaction first. Learning to manage your emotions better helps you handle 'spikes' and stress overload ▶ RB-4: Resisting Stress. Learning how to insulate ourselves from toxic stress effects that penetrate our defences and turn into trauma reactions ▶ RB-5: Mind your Focus. Training your brain to put upset aside and refocus activates brain areas that dampen down bodily alarms and trauma reactions |
|---|---|

Each set of *Trauma-Resisters* and *Resilience-Builders* has a selection of tools attached to it. People pick which ones to integrate into their own personal self-help *Trauma Resistance Action Plans*, or use them to strengthen the part they play in assisting others who've been touched by trauma, whether they're a colleague, a manager or designated peer supporter.

Research shows those who practise strategies like these say they feel more in charge of their stress and anxiety – that it's no longer in charge of them so much. They also say they have tools to help them restabilise, refocus, rebalance and reground, at times when they feel overwhelmed, and strengthen their reserves of resilience by staying focused, positive, more in control of stress-thoughts and emotions.

Resilience-Based Trauma Training

While many tend to automatically associate trauma with tangible incidents, work-based trauma resulting from an accumulation of less readily visible factors such as harassment, bullying, over-bearing bosses, toxic cultures, or systemic stress and work-overload, also appear to be on the rise.

I've noticed over the years that workplaces seem to have spawned more 'busyness cultures'. The pace and pressure of such 'rush-n-hurry' cultures comes at a cost. Stress and its toxic effects can steadily build-up over time and take us by surprise without us noticing. Erratic, uncivil behaviour can become endemic, and in a vicious systemic circle, provide a breeding-ground for more work-based trauma.



Trauma management strategies like I've outlined above may be needed more in the future as workplaces really begin to count the costs of stressful work environments.

My involvement in trauma self-help springs from my work over the past ten years that has centred on helping people build emotional and social intelligence capacities needed to create more caring cultures.



Emotional intelligences such as self-management, resilience, mindfulness and focus have a lot to do with what inspired me to create *Resilience-Based Trauma Training* and the personal pocket guide on *Building Resilience and Handling Trauma* that accompanies our clinic.

See our on-line **Course Calendar** at thechangeforum.com for dates our public clinics are coming up in your area. And if you've a group of 10 or more, we're happy to come to you. Use our on-line **Enquiry form** or call Bill Cropper direct to discuss arrangements for an in-house clinic at a venue of your choice.

More on our *Resilience-Based Trauma Training* clinic on-line at thechangeforum.com.

- Preview [articles and tips](#) on [Resilience-Building and Trauma at Work](#)
- Download back-issues of our [CC E-News](#) e-zine or free [FactFiles](#) to read and share
- Review our on-line [Course Calendar](#) for up-coming scheduled events in your area
- Consult our [Directory of Programs](#) for outlines of the many programs we offer publicly and in-house
- [Contact us](#) anytime to [enquire](#) about individual [coaching](#), in-house clinics or our general **consulting services**

BILL CROPPER – Director, The Change Forum

Tel: +61-(0)7-4068 7591 or +61-(0)7-3352 5979

Mob: +61-(0)429-687 513

Email: billc@thechangeforum.com   