

Book review

Trauma

From Lockerbie to 7/7: How trauma affects our minds and how we fight back

Category: Book Reviews / Self-help

Author: Gordon Turnbull

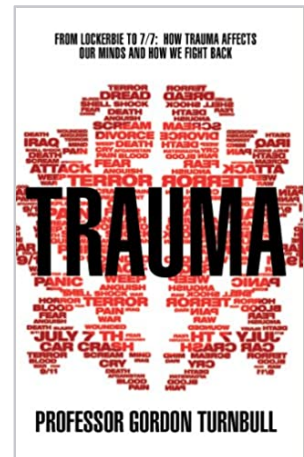
Year: 2012

Publisher: Transport Publishers, UK

ISBN: 9780552158398

Audience: For Community, For Mental Health Workforce

Summary: Based on the author's own trauma incidents and career as a military psychiatrist in the UK, a new understanding of trauma and PTSD and a way to recovery



The book was recently given to the Skylight library by a client with the accompanying words, “This is the most helpful book on trauma I have read”. These words from someone who had experienced traumatic stress piqued my interest in reading it.

At over 600 pages, it's not a book for the time-poor. However, it's very easy to read and holds your interest. It covers the author's journey with his own trauma incidents and his career working as a military psychiatrist in the UK. Among others, he treated first responders involved in the Lockerbie Air disaster in Scotland in 1988, the Kegworth Air disaster in 1989, returning soldiers from the Falklands, RAF pilots who had been shot down in the Gulf war, hostages freed from Lebanon, and later in his career civilians suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at the Ticehurst Centre in England.

Changing view of PTSD

The focus of the book is PTSD – the effects of trauma and how that has been viewed in both the US and UK over the years and Turnbull's own learning from treating people with PTSD after the above disasters and wars. Turnbull contributed to PTSD moving from being viewed as a “pathological fault” of the personality and therefore something that could put a person out of the military forever, to it being seen as the mind's way of coming to terms with things seen, heard, smelled, sensed and touched that were often too terrible for it to comprehend.

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In 1980, the DSM-III (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) categorised the existence of PTSD for the first time, though indicated it was a pathological condition. Turnbull made it his goal to tell as many people as he could that it needed to be re-categorised and separated from such labels as “shell shock” and LMF (lack of moral fibre) and not be seen as an illness.

He writes: “I realized at this time that I had very different ideas about the meaning of PTSD compared with other professionals who were extremely experienced in the field. They, by and large, saw PTSD as a psychopathology – as an illness. Lockerbie had shown me that it couldn’t be. I’d known the mountain rescuers before they’d gone to the scene of the crash and assessed them to be some of the toughest people, mentally and physically, on the planet. This was why Lockerbie had been so life-changing for me. It was difficult – impossible, actually – for me to believe they had developed a psychopathology.”

Forms of therapy outlined

I think PTSD still causes confusion for people today and we are quick to write off the effects of trauma as character flaws rather than embark on strategies that can help people through it. Unresolved trauma is often an underlying cause of a range of symptoms that can, if not treated, be debilitating. The book outlines numerous forms of therapy that are helpful and healing for PTSD.

The book doesn’t have to be read all the way through. It can be dipped into for different aspects of understanding trauma and its effects and the modes of treatment now available. Or, if you want an in-depth treatment of this topic, it’s an easy read for both lay and professional people with an interest in this topic.

The book is available for loan from the Skylight library. Phone 0800 299 100 to arrange for it to be sent out to you. For information about other books available in the Skylight library and all their services, visit www.skylight.org.nz.

Reviewed by Jenny McIntosh, Skylight's Resource Centre Co-ordinator

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