

Dr Karen Treisman- www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk- clinical psychologist, author, and trainer

A blog on my burn a year on- some parallels with the work which I do

A year ago, today I experienced a burn. It was classed as third degree and was/ is on a pretty large area of my body- it spanned from below my belly button to below my left knee. I woke up and was getting ready for training and had my usual hot water to support my vocal cords.

I sat down whilst on the phone to my dad chatting away happily and placed the mug with water which had come straight from the kettle onto the sofa next to me on a stand (same thing I did numerous times a day). In a split second the mug (normal size) must have been unsteady and tipped over and fell on me. I screamed in shock and agonising pain and quickly jumped in a cold shower where I stayed for a significant period of time. I was in a huge amount of pain, but I didn't think it was that serious, and it just looked a bit pink. I had training to do and commitments to keep to and I tend to only seek medical attention when really need it as have several ongoing health conditions.

It was fairly early on in the pandemic and I was on the at-risk shielding list, so I hadn't left my flat in 2 months- hadn't been in a taxi, a shop, a pharmacy etc- hadn't seen anyone and had been super careful.

Over the next 2.5 days the burn got worse and worse (I won't share pictures as I don't want to upset or shock anyone). The blisters that formed were significantly larger than the size of my hands, the skin was darkening, the heaviest of my leg was like nothing I have experienced, and they looked pretty horrific. I had sought 2 video consults with doctors who worrying told me that I had done all the right things and would be ok, and to just leave it and sit tight. On one hand I really wanted to hear this as the last thing I wanted to do with my lung and autoimmune conditions was to go to hospital amidst covid but my gut instinct was also saying something wasn't right. Eventually I had a 3rd video consult with a plastic surgeon this time who was extremely worried and insisted I stop everything I was doing and get to the specialist burns unit as a point of emergency. He was emphatic of the seriousness and was stunned that I could sit with such pain and not be in hospital. So, this time I listened and headed to the hospital- the first time I had ventured out in 2 months.

As a trauma therapist I wanted to share some of my experiences and reflections since with the intention of validating some other people's experiences and hopefully stimulating some food for thought (of course these are just the ones I feel happy to share and hope will support others).

- **Flashbacks and recurring images.** Several times on the way to the hospital, whilst being lifted onto the bed, and having my wound treated which was pretty excruciating I experienced what felt like flashbacks and recurring images. They were fragmented and hard to place- but were the same feeling, sensation and image a few times. I wasn't distressed by these and as a trauma therapist I was curious as to what these might have represented, meant, or were trying to communicate to me. The nurses and doctor asked me as part of my assessment, if I had ever burned myself before or hurt my leg/thigh (the worst of the burn)- very confidently I answered no. I

wracked my brain to think was I missing something but again thought no. On the first night back from hospital. I was in a lot of pain- they had wrapped me like a mummy from beneath my boobs to my ankles, I could hardly move and I had to shuffle- I couldn't bend and to get to the toilet took 30 plus minutes as the short walk was very tricky and my movement was so restrictive (I was mindful as to what this might have felt for someone who this body restriction could take them down a time hole and catapult them down a chain of pain to previous experiences of feeling restricted and unable to move freely).

That night I went to bed. I first had a nightmare that I was being burned alive and my flat was on fire. Understandable in the context of the heat and the pain and the burning sensation I was experiencing. I woke up and was thinking about some associated horrible thoughts like about Grenfell towers and also my grandpas' brother who had been burned alive during the holocaust. I reassured myself, put cold water on my face, took a paracetamol and went back to sleep- still in shock that a small mug of water could do so much damage and that things could change overnight. Shortly after I fell back asleep I had another dream, this time was extraordinary it was when I was 19 years old in Namibia where I had been having the time of my life quad biking on the huge sand dunes and then a sand storm had come and the sand had gotten in my eyes and I had had a pretty serious accident and had rolled numerous times attached to the quad bike down the dune and the quad bike still with the engine on landed on me with the large and heavy tires going round and round over my legs and thighs. I bolted awake and it hit me (in quite a reassuring way)- the burn looked and felt exactly the same as the one I had experiences almost 20 years earlier in Namibia! It was in the almost identical spot on the same leg! There I had said to the doctors and nurses- "no I've never been burned or hurt my leg". Unbelievable how I had most likely dissociated from the experience, disconnected from it, repressed it and so forth. But as Bessel Van Der Kolk says the the body holds the score and Babette Rothschild says the body remembers. As Gabor Mate says trauma is not what happens to do but what happens inside of you. I would say. If the body could talk what would it say? What journey has it been on? This was a perfect example of this. My body remembered. It was in my body's memory bank. My mind was going down a memory time hole back to that time in Namibia- the power of the mind-body connection (let alone when the trauma has been preverbal, in utero, and/or multiple times).

Interestingly, a year later I still have regular neuro pains, numbness, and discomfort in that area. Also, I have phantom pains often at night- when I move or get up to go to the toilet and I can feel the wound or the heavy massive blisters and need to feel them or reassure myself they aren't they- once again the power of body experiences, a sensory imprint, and the multi-sensory experience. And this from one experience, what this might be like for the adults and child I support who have had physical, moral, spiritual, relational violations, wounds, and injuries over and over again- most often in the context of a relationship.

- **Fears and ripples since-** Since my burn a year ago today I have not looked at hot drinks the same again. It took me 6 weeks to drink a hot drink at all and had to do it

gradually and carefully. I now regularly drink them but add cold water to all. I notice I am much more cautious around anything hot than before, spoiling spaghetti, lighting candles, sparklers, being near a fire place, putting things in the oven, frying eggs, boiling water, taking things out the microwave etc. Whilst I still do it and it hasn't stopped me doing anything this highlights how one isolated incident has heightened my awareness, vigilance, attentional bias etc. Once again, this crystallised for the children I work with what experiencing numerous, multiple, and cumulative traumas over and over again- when their memory bank has been filled up over and over again, where their fears have been reinforced and embedded over and over again. This caution was from a single event. When I was in hospital, I kept on thinking of the children I work with who have experienced a multitude and plethora of horrific events over and over again. I also had several children come to mind who had been burned by their parents, with scolding water, with irons, with lighters and others. Some of the nightmares, flashbacks, and feelings I was experiencing from a one-off event in my safe household by myself- how this would feel as a child where the pain had been inflicted by another person the person who should be your safe haven and secure base. And how their cries or pain or wounds would have been tended to afterwards or their needs met?

- **Some of my hospital experiences-** I must say there were a lot of amazing, caring, nurturing and beautiful experiences within the hospital but sadly as we know often the tricky ones stick; and of course given my speciality area is trauma informed systems and so my attentional bias is to notice those. There were loads but 2 that stick in my mind. 1) on one occasion- I had to go every day and then every two days for a significant period of time- on one of the early days when I couldn't really move, I was stripped naked and left standing exposed for all to see whilst the nurse went for several minutes to get something- numerous people including men walked past me. Small things make a big difference. What could this have felt like for someone who previously had felt exposed, watched, made to feel powerless? This could have sent someone down a chain of pain and a memory time hole. For example, someone who had been sexually abused. Also, what about someone with worries, fears, and difficulties around their body image? Let alone some of the cultural nuances, beliefs and values around nakedness and being exposed etc.

2) on one occasion I asked if the procedure was going to hurt. I have a pretty high pain threshold but a perfectly reasonable question. The nurse with good intentions I believe, looked at me and said, "oh dear you are an anxious one aren't you?". What messages does this give someone about asking a simple question or about it being ok to show pain or vulnerability? How does curiosity or seeking answers equate to anxiety? If I was anxious which would be ok and valid being told in a patronising way you are anxious is not going to help someone feel cared for and soothed. She doesn't know about past experiences of procedures, pain, feeling done to, powerless etc- again could send someone down a timehole. Similarly, when I was shouted at for not coming in sooner to get treatment - is shouting going to help- is it going to make someone feel welcomed and safe? Were they holding in mind what the barriers and apprehensions might there have been or what someone's relationship to help or care might be; or how the context of covid was impacted and so forth?

Dr Karen Treisman- www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk- clinical psychologist, author, and trainer

How one might already feel vulnerable, in pain, silly for hurting oneself and therefore, will having this reinforced by a professional in a position of power help? How might this be for someone who has had a history of being silenced, or told to conceal their feelings, to have a stiff upper lip, or that they are weak etc? And so forth.

3) Again, simple things make a big difference. Walking in and not having access to water. When someone has been burned not only is hydration key and hospitals tend to be overheated, but when burned you are hot- when people are worried or anxious usually, they are thirsty. Similarly, having posters of horrific scars and wounds caused by burns is stress inducing not reducing- having paintings in bright red- probably not helpful!

- I also have wondered how different this would have been when I was a teenager and far more body conscious or focused on a scar or in social situations where I felt more looked at or exposed? What would this have been like not in the context of a pandemic? (from seeking treatment, to having to move more, I haven't been able to wear jeans or tight trousers since etc) and so so much more.

There have been so many other thoughts in my mind, but I hope these reflections just offer some food for thought, and increase empathy and compassion for those where trauma, fear, pain and threat have been on a regular cumulative basis.

For more on trauma-informed medical experiences please see my free report on my website and for more on trauma informed organisational change please see my books (2 volumes sold together)- treasure box for creating trauma informed organizations.