Dr Heather Herington: 5 Things You Need To Heal After a Dramatic Loss Or Life Change

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The world seems to be reeling from one crisis to another. We've experienced a global pandemic, economic uncertainty, political and social turmoil. Then there are personal traumas that people are dealing with, such as the loss of a loved one, health issues, unemployment, divorce or the loss of a job.

Coping with change can be traumatic as it often affects every part of our lives.

How do you deal with loss or change in your life? What coping strategies can you use? Do you ignore them and just push through, or do you use specific techniques?

In this series called "5 Things You Need To Heal After a Dramatic Loss Or Life Change" we are interviewing successful people who were able to heal after a difficult life change such as the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, or other personal hardships. We are also talking to Wellness experts, Therapists, and Mental Health Professionals who can share lessons from their experience and research.

As a part of this interview series, I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr Heather Herington. She has been a naturopathic medical doctor for over 30 years, specializing in PTS primarily from sexual abuse. She created the retreat, Moving to Healing, where participants engage in healing modalities through the expressive arts as well as naturopathic medicine, learning to balance their *biochemisty naturally and tell (or revise) their story of the traumatic event (s). Also a writer and performer, her creative work — radio plays, musicals, solo show and novels (Flawed and the upcoming The Sting of Absence) — now includes two non-fiction books for these troubling times, Surviving a Viral Pandemic and the upcoming Transforming Trauma, a drugless and creative path to healing PTS.*

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Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we start, our readers would love to "get to know you" a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood backstory?

I was born into grief and became a helper early on. My mother had lost two babies and my brother, severely asthmatic, was often rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night. My mother lived in terror she would lose another child. As the fourth child, it's not surprising that this affected me and in the end I would become a helper professionally, although being a doctor wasn't my first dream. Rather circumstances propelled me to heal the trauma I experienced from having two parents with PTS and a sibling who constantly needed medical attention. Helping became a way of life.

Thankfully I was extremely curious about everything going on around me and a big reader, the library holy ground every Saturday. I dreamed of becoming an actress and writing my own parts. An orphan from Scotland, my mother's family had been performers and it pleased her that I (subconsciously) became the characters in any book I read. By 16, I was dreaming of meeting the actress Genevieve Bujold (we are both from Québec)) when I was raped and my whole world turned upside down. I had an opportunity to run away to the wilderness in Nova Scotia and here I ultimately met psychiatrists, psychologists, and sexologists who had trained or been influenced by the psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich who was the first to coin the term "the body-mind connection" in the 1930s. This became my mantra, understanding how the mind and emotion influences the physiological hence disease. After graduating Dalhousie University (BSc Biology) folllowed by John Bastyr College of Naturopathic Medicine (now Bastyr University) I had the tools to dig deep when the Archdiocese of Vancouver asked me to treat those sexually assaulted by priests. This expanded to grief from many sources such as the loss of a loved one particularly a child, loss of health and so on. I was good at it and as such I played out what Jung termed the "wounded doctor," *i.e.* the best kind if you are going to be effective in helping a person heal.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

"Never give up." Perhaps I could be more emphatic: NEVER EVER GIVE UP.

I am grateful that as a health professional treating people with PTS/trauma I realized early on that the expressive arts can be instrumental in getting well or managing change. I took chances (retreats, writing books, creating radio plays) allowing my passion for creativity to help my patients. Taking risks in the use of these modalities brought light to the fact that naturopathic medicine and the expressive arts are an extraordinary duo to facilitate deep healing on a truly holistic level. This two pronged approach showed me drugs are not necessary for many health conditions or diseases including autoimmune disease, depression, anxiety, addiction and mental illness even schizophrenia that often have trauma at the core. By balancing biochemistry naturally and telling (or revising) the story we can elicit powerful change in the physiological and the psychological presentation.

The reason for this is that the brain is neuroplastic, it can heal itself. Naturopathic medicine and the expressive arts encourage this, thus becoming true healing tools. I saw this over and over in my clinic and my bout with Graves Disease (autoimmune hyperthyroidism) really brought it home being a disease I was trained not to treat. But I was able to heal myself, without a thyroidectomy or irradiation, feeding on my confidence from treating less dangerous conditions and diseases and acknowledging my underlying grief at the core of the constellation of symptoms, as stated by Dr Graves himself. When there is a level of emotional trauma, this must be addressed for long lasting healing. My book, *Transforming Trauma, a drugless and creative path to healing PTS* underlines this need.

If I hadn't been curious and had given up trying to understand the underlying why of disease, the core emotional aspect, I would never have realized what we are all capable of without resorting to prescription drugs that can alter our brain and suppress our authenticity.

You have been blessed with much success. In your opinion, what are the top three qualities that you possess that have helped you accomplish so much? If you can, please share a story or example for each.

1. **Good listening skills.** This leads to people trusting you. I don't think there is anything more satisfying than understanding and acknowledging someone else's psychological pain. It's such a deep connection that evolves that sometimes simply listening is enough for real change. My office in my Vancouver clinic became charged with an extraordinary energy…I could hardly believe it at first. To realize people trusted me simply because I listened well and cared about what they were saying was astounding to me. This opened up floodgates of emotion I was privileged to be a part of as this would lead them to expose their deepest secrets and traumas. I learned so much from patients in AA or NA or were sex addicts, many with profound PTS/trauma. I have carried these lessons of listening well, and the sacredness of trust and being sincere to all aspects of my life including in my interviews on my podcast, *Dr Heather Uncensored*. Might not always work with my daughter but it seems to work everywhere else. ☺
2. **Visualize.** Keep your eye on the goal. Continually make lists to carry you there. Every day. And if it's not a list write down ideas. Don't wait to remember. I am always writing ideas down that turn into lists to make sure everything is covered. In daily meditation remember where you are in your goals, acknowledge how you feel and how you want the day, the week, the month or even years, to go. Visualization is very powerful.
3. **Intuition.** Don't deny that voice, that feeling. Don't belittle the fact that this can lead to profound insights. Working with patients has given me an opportunity to develop this sixth sense of sensing the needs of people who are experiencing trauma. This is on an individual level but also comes through my books and our musicals, I never expected my nonfiction books to be so relevant in this time of COVID. I started them years ago not knowing what was about to happen. Intuition springs from an unknown source and to follow it has been extraordinary, allowing me to share positive actions with people at a time when they really need to learn how to take better care of themselves, to heal underlying conditions, to bolster their immune systems. And now with so many young people suffering to the point of suicide I am grateful for my second book, *Transforming Trauma*. It is essential to revolutionize our mental health care system including treating grief and trauma and that's what it is about.

Let's now shift to the main part of our discussion about 'Healing after Loss.' Based on your experiences and knowledge, what advice would you give others to help them through a difficult life challenge? What are your "5 Things You Need To Heal After a Dramatic Loss or Life Change"? Please share a story or example of each.

That deep feeling of emptiness. Finality. Hardly able to get a breath. A heart broken in half. Yearning for what was. Thoughts and images spinning out of control. Falling into an abyss of grief that won't let go.

In the beginning grief is a shock and your brain and body responds accordingly. Hypertensive, shortness of breath, emotions pingpong-ing from sadness to anger to denial to acceptance as per Elizabeth Kubler Ross. Or leaning on Porges' Polyvagal our nervous system responds at various stages in grieving, the process of healing full of contradictions as one finds their balance. You want to activate that healthy ventral vagus nerve of the parasympathetic system but the sympathetic can get in the way with flight or fight or the dorsal vagus just sits down in denial, frozen to any movement. Porges talks about the social engagement system of this theory, how we move to healing through the compassion and witnessing by others. And so the contradictions mount, the need to be alone, the need to be around people, the need to sit quietly, the need to distract yourself and so on.

Therefore I give these five suggestions based on various points in the process. It may seem linear or it can be completely out of sequence as one grieves, hoping to be free of that deep pain, that deep yearning for what was, some day.

1. **Find a safe space to give yourself time to feel your feelings on a regular basis.**

This can be a meditation space or a place in nature where you can simply sit and breathe, slowing down emotional turmoil. It allows the opportunity to acknowledge the pain of loss in a safe and controlled area. You can place photos of your loved one or others who have given comfort, given strength or things that have meaning like a family heirloom, a gift or even a piece of clothing of the person you are grieving.

And/or it may simply be a regular walk in nature where we can gain strength from a beautiful surrounding. Or grow plants, even on a balcony. By tending them and having a connection with nature can be magic: as you learn to accept loss, you witness new growth in front of you. Wonder of this world can transform grief and is why there may be no better activity than gardening where you can slowly and privately unroll your deepest thoughts and emotions while tending new life.

When I lost my best friend it took me seven years not to feel terrible grief but I was able to feel it by myself when it was overwhelming because I love nature. To walk in a forest or by a river or shore, sitting quietly following your breath, even if this is something you have never done before, is so simple yet so profound.

2. Distraction.

Distraction is necessary when images and thoughts are crowding the mind to the point one can hardly catch their breath, let alone sit quietly and allow feelings. It may take months before being able to sit quietly. And distraction can be paramount at least in the beginning. Because how do we process grief when our body wants to shut down, never get out of bed, fall into an abyss somewhere far away? It seems insurmountable to get to the other side yet through small acts such as admiring a sunset, a flower, a landscape, a piece of music, or by moving our bodies, even creating dances, or letting out our voices through song we can let go of that deep raw emotional pain, bit by bit, distracting ourselves, a process that allows us to move through the *tsouris* (Yiddish for suffering), however slowly, coming into acceptance of the loss.

Being with other people whether one friend or in a group such as a choir or watching a concert or sports can generate camaraderie and distracts us while increasing the pleasure of being alive. In this way we distract ourselves to more readily step into our quiet place that at some point will begin to breathe gratitude for what the person gave us, allowing the pain to be replaced by curiosity of life once again.

3. Access your creativity to process your experience.

Once we have distracted ourselves enough to sit we can turn to our imagination and use our five senses to create something. This is what Henry Beston did after being in World War 1: he wrote fairy tales to transform his emotional pain. I've come to believe all great art comes from tragedy and that inherent talent is inconsequential. We can see this all the way back to the *Odyssey* by Homer to the children's book, *I never saw another butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from the Terezin Concentration Camp 1942–1944.* The latter is an extraordinary book of children's art as they coped with the loss of their parents, their siblings, their homes, their culture.

Creativity can range from writing a poem, drawing a stick figure of our family or chanting om just because. It simply takes a willingess to be curious and allow our muse to push us forward with our truth or alternatively with our fantasies (which stem from the subconscious so we are still being authentic albeit less directly.)

4. Scientific inquiry.

I have noticed that people like to know what their brain is doing these days in terms of illness or conditions like grief. I researched Graves Disease when I was diagnosed and found out that in the mid 1800s Dr Graves in Dublin, Ireland and Dr Caleb Perry (25 year earlier in England) understood grief to be at the core of this autoimmune disorder of hyperthryoidism. That gave me so much confidence to address the core problem and I used singing to help modulate and heal the thyroid gland, an idea that is gaining traction.

As noted earlier, Dr. Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory is a real help in understanding the emotional responses of our nervous system. It allows us to realize we aren't alone in this and we can do something concrete. Dr. Deb Dana uses a ladder as a metaphor, showing the ventral vagus at the top as healthy while the dorsal vagus is frozen at the bottom of the ladder, so to speak. In the middle the sympathetic nervous system(SNS) is expressed through fight or flight. Frozen feelings (dorsal vagus) can give way to flight or fight such as anger (SNS).

This knowledge gives us something to do to make it to that goal of happy and healthy, by aiming for the ventral vagus to activate the parasympathetic and ultimately the neurotransmitter GABA, bobbing through our very long vagus nerve.

5. Health Basics.

Taking care of yourself physiologically when your mind is spinning out of control is hard but it is important to try, even just a bit more each day. Your already traumatized therefore overreactive body will get worse by eating sugar and junk food. Maintaining stable blood sugar helps to balance psychological swings. An anti-inflammatory diet can include great snacks that don't call out insulin or upset our other hormones. Cravings can be managed by eating a tiny bit, generating a satisfied feeling. Exercise daily, even jumping on a trampoline on your balcony will help get the lymph flowing and increase endorphins. Exercising outside gives us the added bonus of connecting with nature, feeling something to connect with beyond one's self. Or try hydrotherapy by taking a bath with Epsom salts or Dead Sea salts adding lavender or ylang ylang essential oils to let the rough edges of emotion soften. Homeopathically, Igantia can make the grief more manageable although a professional consultation is best. Botanically speaking there are so many plants that generate energy or calm. My favorite (and delivers both) is Ashwagandha, an Ayurvedic herb.

Let's discuss this in more specific terms. After the dust settled, what coping mechanisms do you suggest to deal with the pain of the loss or change?

Share your feelings safely with someone. Practice breath work daily. Meditate. Garden. Try water therapy. Spend time in nature. Eat well. Be with people. Be alone. Sing. Dance. Write it out. Draw it out. Act. Create characters. Listen to music. Go to movies, plays. Let yourself feel but wrangle it over time by transforming the energy.

How can one learn to heal and "let go" of the negative aspects of that event?

You may never truly "let go" in terms of how the loss happened. It may be necessary to forgive someone's action or inaction. Ultimately you can transform your thoughts and emotions through acknowledging what the lost one gave you and filling it from another source. This can take time, years, decades or never, especially with the loss of a child. I have heard people who have experienced this level of grief say their child is now their angel. Whether you feel this is true or not, this is an example of why transformation through our five senses can be so helpful. I believe the creative process encourages this transformation, this "letting go," better than anything else.

Aside from letting go, what did one do to create an internal, emotional shift to feel better?

I am a daily meditator and someone who loves using my imagination. Both of these- silence and a creative activity can allow us to feel our emotions safely. Singing and playing music gives me tremendous shifts of mood and research shows this helps our brain: our hippocampus makes new neurons. Music (and perhaps all creative action) calms our amygdala, part of the limbic system that has so much to do with emotion and strengthens our prefrontal cortex, balancing our executive function, that part of the brain that has gone a bit off the rails because of trauma. Learning almost anything seems to shift our brain and can help comfort us.

Community is so important to healing grief. We need to know who is there with us. We need to remind ourselves others have or do feel the same way and we can reach out. Sometimes just doing something for someone else takes us out of depression and lifts our spirits as well as theirs. We may deepen friendships as we acknowledge what we had with our loved one who passed and what someone else can share with us. We make new friends or revive friendships and allow what was so precious and safe and fun with new people. It helps to have grandchildren.

How can one eventually reframe the consequences and turn it into a positive situation?

Life is about change, growth, we need to understand that, to feel that this is a central truth of being alive. Losing a child is the hardest of all and imagining them as our angel can really allow joy to reemerge. That goes for loss of any loved one. And that's where memories and creativity come in: by wrapping yourself up in that you remember how you felt with them, what you loved about them, reimagining them through the five senses. You hear the sound of their voice, the shape of their face, the texture of their skin, their smell, colors of their clothes. Those memories keep them alive within you and can allow you to appreciate these qualities in loved ones still alive.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be?

Be kind to each other. Go that extra distance to understand how to help people feel loved and regain the ability to laugh. Work with each other to manifest a kinder world where we learn to discuss, not polarize our beliefs into hate. In the end we need love love love, to realize love is all we need, like that old Beatles tune says.

I would also want to encourage people to use the expressive arts to connect with themselves wherever they are at, whatever they are feeling. The muse is available for everyone, not just artists and celebrities.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person

in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them. :-)

Stuart Brand because he isn't afraid of speaking truth to power. He is very aware of the connections that harm us and can speak about serious issues while being insightful and fun.

Lady Gaga because she is love incarnate and incredibly talented. Her foundation for mental health recovery is doing so much good. I'd like to give her both a copy of my upcoming book, *Transforming Trauma* as well as introduce her to our children's musical *The Calling Hour* that was written to help soothe traumatized children. I saw it pesonally when it was performed in Watts and Highland Park and other underserved schools…that was an experience I will never forget.

How can our readers further follow your work online?

Thank you. I have a podcast, *Dr Heather Uncensored*, that is based on my three latest books: *Surviving a Viral Pandemic*, *Transforming Trauma* and my second novel, *The Sting of Absence*. *Flawed,* a family saga focusing on mental illness, is the prequel. *The Sting of Absence* tells the story of the Acadian genocide over three centuries through a multicultural family and includes the need for reparations for Acadians, Blacks and Indigenous people.

I also write musicals with my husband, Avi Gross: *Meshugeneh, the Musical, The Old Show* and *The Calling Hour*. As the world opens up we hope to get them back on track.

Thank you so much for sharing these important insights. We wish you continued success and good health!

Wellness

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