

Mental Health First Aid

LIVE LIKE THE WORLD IS DYING: SKILL SERIES #6

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Strangers In A Tangled Wilderness

Mental Health First Aid is based on an episode of the podcast *Live Like the World is Dying*, released November 8, 2022. Margaret Killjoy interviewed Smokey, a mental health counselor.

The truth is: bad things will happen to us. It's part of living in the world, and if you are a person who is heavily engaged in the world – meaning you're involved in politics, or activism, or even just curious about the world – you will probably be exposed on a more regular basis to bad things that can cause trauma. But even if you're not involved in any of those things, you will still encounter difficulties in the course of your life. There's nothing that can keep you from having traumatic experiences.

The good news: this has always been the case for people. We've always done this. And the other good news is that we actually know a lot about what goes into resilience. We have lots of stories and some research to show that when bad things happen to us, there is an approach that actually can help catalyze really impressive strength and change our life in a positive direction.

This zine aims to help you build resiliency against trauma and to minimize the effect of a traumatic event (or events) on your life. Please don't confuse it for a guidebook showing you the path to happiness and fulfillment. What we hope to express is how to bounce back quickly – and hopefully even thrive – after traumatic experiences.

The Internet Impedes Resiliency

The internet, social media, capitalism, and nation-state building (especially as we understand it today): all these kinds of things erode what we need in order to become resilient people.

The early internet was about people sharing and creating meaning together. It was very powerful. That seems harder to access on today's Internet, especially on the large social media platforms which are consciously designed to achieve certain modes of experience, rather than allowing for freely sharing and creating together.

"Social" media is stunted by its need to attract attention. The easiest way to get attention is through outrage, delivered so rapidly that it eliminates your processing time. Relative anonymity is the coin of these

networks, which is why bots can be successfully deployed to create rapid, outrageous content.

All these kinds of things stunt and deform what could potentially be a useful tool for developing strong resiliency. Thankfully, we don't need the internet to build resiliency!

Prevention vs. Healing

There are two things people confuse, both of which are very important: One is how to prevent chronic effects from traumatic experiences. The other is how to take care of a chronic injury from a traumatic experience, if you already have one or if you develop one.

These two things are not the same thing; they're quite different. If you already have a chronic traumatic response of some sort – such as post traumatic stress syndrome or any of the other related phenomena – you should approach that quite differently than building resilience, which doesn't protect you from having a traumatic experience, it just allows you to frame it, understand it, and maybe even thrive and grow from it.

Predictors of Resiliency

Becoming more resilient is the cornerstone to preventing chronic traumatic injury, and the hallmark of resiliency is that it's not individual.

The robustness of your social network is probably the strongest predictor of resilience. Robustness means how many social connections you have, and then even more, the depth of those relationships.

Quantity does actually create a certain level of quality, interestingly, especially around 'micro-social interactions.' These are the regular interactions with people we don't necessarily think of as relationships, such as connections with storepersons. We need these "small" social interactions as part of our social network, and we also need more.

The depth of your network is also measured in meaningful relationships – not necessarily who is most important to you, but people

with whom you share your emotions and thoughts and things like that.

Another big predictor of resilience is diversity in your social network, or knowing diverse individuals.

Being part of a community that provides a sense of belonging tends to give us more resiliency. This is more than just knowing like-minded people, and more than participating with Internet affinity forums or chat groups. Belonging to a group is closely tied with having a sense of meaning or purpose, which is one of the other major predictors of resiliency.

Having time – meaning processing time – is a strong indicator of resiliency.

These predictors are the things we can learn how to create in our own lives, maximize, and leverage for Mental Health First Aid.

Direct First Aid

Community

Real self care is connecting to your social network as much as you can. This is the opposite of what your mind and body tell you after a traumatic experience, and unfortunately it's an area where much of the current "self-care" movement gets it wrong. Although crisis and trauma tell you to retreat from your social network because things are too intense, that's the opposite of what you should be doing. You should connect.

If you find yourself in an unenviable situation where you don't have a social network, then you need to connect to professionals because they can somewhat fill in for a social network. Therapists, social workers, peer

groups, support groups, things like that can help fill some of the gap when we lack a social network. Some of these options, like support groups, even provide a sense of belonging, although you generally don't get that from therapy or even group therapy.

If you're on the other side, trying to help someone who has been traumatized, then actively engage with them. Keep in mind that it's going to be hard. You need to continuously engage with them, and not with distractions like going to a movie, or getting some ice cream; it's not about having a good time. It's also not about going into the details of the traumatic experience. What's important when helping someone with trauma is reconnecting them to a sense of belonging. This could be your friendship, your shared community or group, your political movement – whatever brought you together.

Meaning

Let's use a more specific example: Your best friend is working through the trauma of being arrested at a political protest. Do you advise them to avoid politics altogether? Or should you tell them to go right back out to the next protest? The resiliency-building direction is not either of those extremes, but rather getting involved in an activity like jail support for people in similar situations. Ultimately the best way to help with healing is connecting to meaning, and bringing the community together. Showing the resiliency of the community will vicariously and contagiously affect the individual.

We also need to acknowledge that the individual who's been traumatized might have a crisis of meaning. If this happens, allow the conversation to flow, and help that person reconnect to what they found meaningful to start with.

Reframing

Why is it natural to focus on anxiety or fear when it creeps up? It's somewhat evolutionary, right? Those feelings warn us of a threat, and are supposed to draw our attention. And if we're not careful, fear and anxiety will draw our attention away from the quieter feelings because those soothing messages in our heads are not as flashy.

By going into the anxiety, going into the fear, you're forcing yourself to justify whatever is causing those feelings. And then it becomes more and more elaborate, and it gets crazier and crazier very quickly. What's needed in these moments is help with reframing the situation.

In a space where you actively experience trauma, there are two ways to help strengthen your resilience in real time: (1) connect to somebody in your social network by bringing them to the place, either literally (in person) or abstractly (like a phone call); and/or (2) call on your own internal resilience to help reframe the situation, and pocket the anxiety. (More on this in a moment.)

With both of these, you've heard the negative voice, the fear and anxiety, but called on either an external or internal voice to speak some positivity into the situation. You change your attunement, away from the negative and toward the positive.

The next step is to connect to the deeper meaning in the situation. Ask yourself, why am I doing this thing? Why is it important to me? Try to understand or to remember the purpose behind what you're doing. Let yourself focus on that.

Here's an example: You're a little bit afraid of heights, but you need to climb on a ladder today. Fear begins its negative whispers: *Ladders aren't safe! You will fall off this ladder, hit your head, and need to go to the emergency room, which will stick you with a huge hospital bill; you'll have to miss work to recover from your injury, so they'll fire you, and then you'll lose your...* (See how that pesky anxiety becomes more and more elaborate?)

Before the negative voice begins a worst-case-scenario spiral, you instead call a friend. You tell them about your situation, perhaps talking

with them — use a hands-free bluetooth! — as you climb up the ladder. Your friend can act as a voice of reassurance while you're facing anxiety. Or, you can act as your own positive voice by speaking back to the fear, saying, "I have been on ladders before and I have been fine. I've got this. I am ok."

Then remind yourself why you need to be on the ladder. Is there an important practical reason? For example, do you need to clean out the gutters so that water won't back up and leak through your roof? Is there something enjoyable to be done on the ladder, or after you get off? Perhaps you're climbing a ladder to pick apples and make applesauce or apple pie or turnovers or apple chutney or... You get the point.

Not Ignoring

Please don't conflate the practice of reframing with ignoring your feelings. It's still necessary to approach potential dangers and sources of trauma with preparation and a reasonable amount of caution. To use the previous

example: you wouldn't want to become overconfident in your ladder climbing ability to the point of ignoring basic ladder safety. You still want to make sure the ladder is set up correctly and on firm ground before you start climbing.

So when the little "beep beep" warning sounds in your head, don't ignore the message. Be aware of why you're receiving a warning signal. Then, gently pocket the anxiety, and invite your resiliency to come forward and share its message, too.

The practice of reframing isn't about ignoring, denying or arguing with your feelings. It's about keeping the negative thoughts from spiraling out of control by making room for positive thinking and for connection to deeper meaning and purpose.

Long Term Care

Traumatic experiences do not always lead to chronic injuries. Building our resiliency and applying mental health first aid in times of trauma will greatly reduce the risk of chronic injuries. Sometimes they may still happen. And certainly there are many people walking around today with chronic injuries impacting their ability to do what they want and need to do in life. With so much change needed in our society and all the collective effort it takes to keep up momentum, we need everybody working at their ability. So wherever we can fix injury, we should.

To fully heal from a chronic injury, we need two things: First, a deep understanding of the injury, often not just by the person, but also by a therapist. Second, short-term techniques to strengthen the areas around the injury. Let's look at each of these in more detail...

When examining a chronic injury, therapists offer a more-objective external viewpoint than we can provide ourselves. They can identify, or name, an injury when you struggle to see it. Therapists also help develop a much-needed understanding of the effects of the injury, of how a chronic injury is impacting your life. Maybe you aren't sleeping well, or drinking too much, or struggling to maintain meaningful relationships in your life. Knowing the "what and how" of an injury informs the second step: the tools needed for healing.

There are many well-established cognitive techniques used for chronic injuries. In fact, you've probably heard of at least one: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), EMDR, and Mutual Aid/Self Therapy (MAST) to name just a few. Both DBT and MAST take advantage of group techniques, and help to build the "predictors of resilience" mentioned earlier in this zine.

Despite the length or severity of your chronic injury, employing cognitive techniques should quickly begin to provide some remediation. And these

tools need not be employed for the rest of your life to be beneficial, either. Although some injuries might never be completely healed, a great deal of strength can be built around traumatic wounds to lessen their short- and long-term impacts.

Consider: Damaged trust is a very common injury. We all experience it at some point. Sometimes it happens early in life, in the form of traumatic betrayal by a parent or caretaker. Such early-in-life damage to trust can root deep, impacting the way we fundamentally connect with other people, or affecting our ability to feel safe in certain environments. Although we might never again trust the person who caused the injury, building up our relationships with friends and groups can help to heal the deeper sense of mistrust for others. The impacts of the initial injury can finally cease, and we won't be indefinitely doomed to have dysfunctional relationships, lack of sleep, alcoholism, or whatever other symptoms came from the traumatic event.

Who Can Help

Specialists and Communities

Do we need specialists for mental healthcare? Well, yes... and no. It depends.

Healing is ultimately work we do within ourselves, but therapy guides and strengthens our healing process. Therapy is a shared activity, and it's relational. So if you have friends, if you have community, if you have a place or places where you find belonging, then you might not need a specialist. Those people or groups know you, and there's a natural affinity. A group or community also tends to provide you with opportunities to engage in things that have nothing to do with the injury, they're just healthy and good for you.

Therapists are available to help anyone. If you lack a social network, if your resiliency reserves are depleted, or if your injury is complex and confusing, therapists are willing to work with you. Also, they're trained in cognitive therapies, so they can help you find the right techniques and put them to use in your life.

It's important to note that friends and communities aren't magically imbued with the knowledge and skills needed for tending traumatic mental wounds and healing chronic injuries. Even with a supportive, deeply involved social network, some people and situations will still need the help of a specialist. Perhaps, with a bit of reading and practical experience, that "specialist" could even be you.

You? Yes, You!

Helping others is a really great way to help yourself.

This is especially true if you have experienced a mental health crisis. The

idea of a “wounded healer” has existed in many Indigenous cultures, and was vaulted amongst ancient Greeks. Someone who is working through a chronic injury has a deeper understanding of the issue, more access to empathy, and experience using available healing techniques.

From your viewpoint as a person who has healed from a traumatic injury, you have a profound perspective on how the experience challenged you, and hopefully, helped you to grow. Engaging with others who are actively healing helps you continue your own inner work. It also connects you back to a sense of purpose and provides meaning – all of which strengthens your underlying resiliency.

Consider the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program. Despite its problems, AA has been around for nearly 100 years and has spread all over the world. There is a lot the program gets right in terms of emotional first aid and (re) building resiliency, not least of which is its robust social network. When someone mentions AA, most of us immediately picture a group of people sitting in folding chairs, taking turns sharing about their trials and triumphs.

It's a safe space for vulnerability, where seeking out a "specialist" (in the form of a sponsor) is encouraged.

From direct, one-on-one assistance, to group and community-level work, you can help yourself and others by engaging in mental health first aid and long-term care.

In Summary

“For people who have resources – communities, meaning, a social network – it’s worth investing your time and your energy into because that’s going to build your resilience. If you want to get psychologically strong, that is the easiest and the best investment. Put down the self help book. Call your friend. Don’t search Google for the symptoms of this, that, or the other thing. Connect to what’s important to you. And then lastly, try to help others or help the world in some way. Those are going to be profound and effective ways to build long lasting resilience as an individual, and as a community, we should design our communities around that.” – Smokey

Letter from the Editor

Not everyone spends their lives wrestling with mental health issues, but we all experience emotional trauma and, at some point, we all go through periods of chronic mental illness.

Three years ago I started writing this zine based on Margaret and Smokey's interview on Live Like the World is Dying (ep 52, 18 Nov 2022). I thought the transcript could easily be reformatted and join the growing line of "skills zines" that Strangers had started to produce. Secretly, I also hoped that immersing myself in the content of the interview would serve as a magic healing balm.

You see, I was a few years into a series of traumatic personal events which had left me deeply wounded. I needed every word of this zine — I needed it to be out in the world for someone else to find so they could

use it to help me. But after weeks and weeks of intermittently attempting to organize the content, I gave up. My executive function had collapsed amidst my worst (and final) downward spiral.

It was several months before I began to see a therapist to work on my chronic injury. I slowly worked through a program of CBT, and read a couple of books on attachment theory. And I started sharing my story; I talked to family and friends about what I had gone through. Gradually I moved away from constant apologies and feelings of shame, into understanding and acceptance.

It wasn't quick. It wasn't easy. There was no magic balm, although it sometimes feels that way when I contemplate how much pain and chaos I worked through. But I also never did it alone. When I reached my hand into the darkness, I found hands reaching back to guide me.

This zine on Mental Health First Aid was never very far from my thoughts. I had volunteered to write it, and I knew I had to see it through. After all, I can't disappoint the other collective members at Strangers in a Tangled

Wilderness! They are an important part of my community, and I'm lucky to call some of them my dearest friends.

Thanks for helping me glue together my broken plates and get them spinning again.

With love,
Ogemakwe/Brooke

More from Strangers

We release audio versions of each of these featured zines, as well as interviews and other behind the scenes content, through our podcast Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness, so we hope you'll check it out! Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness is a collectively run anarchist publisher. We put out books, zines, and podcasts, which you can find at tangledwilderness.org. Our podcasts include: **Live Like the World is Dying**, your podcast for what feels like the end times; **The Spectacle**, for people who love movies and hate cops; and **Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness**. Thanks for reading!

About the Skills Series

The Live Like the World is Dying Skills Series is an ever-growing collection of zines about basic community preparedness topics. They are available for free at tangledwilderness.org/zines and you can find physical copies for purchase at-cost at tangledwilderness.org/shop.



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