

## **The Paradoxes of Healing Trauma**

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Army leaders are familiar with Counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine and the paradoxes of COIN operations. There are striking similarities between some principles of COIN and finding a pathway for healing emotional and psychological trauma. The opening pages of the COIN manual state words to this effect: Success in counterinsurgency operations comes by protecting the populace, not the COIN force. Similarly, success in healing trauma comes from tending to and unburdening the inner hurting parts and not empowering the coping mechanisms we use to avoid the pain. This article serves to encourage the reader to normalize what is happening and to move forward in their personal healing journey.

*“Sometimes the more you protect the force, the less secure you are...”*

When our focus shifts from those who are suffering (the populace) to those who are protecting (the Soldier), the suffering increases and the insurgency gains ground. The insurgency is the problem and the populace is the space where the problem manifests. Likewise, when we experience traumatic events (e.g. betrayal, witnessing death or significant injury, prolonged exposure to danger or the potential for it, or family of origin / early developmental wounds), we often develop compensating, protective parts that create more problems for the individual. The trauma is the enemy, the inner psychic world is the space where the problem manifests, and the protectors (the COIN force), are the normal coping mechanisms that take on exaggerated and inordinate roles. The normal coping mechanisms, such as numbness, become stuck ‘on’ in every moment. The more a traumatized individual empowers or ‘feeds’ these coping mechanisms, the more the wound grows and entrenches in the individual. Protectors are meant for one thing- get us through the actual trauma. After that, they must stand down and the attention needs to be on the populace... the wounded emotional and psychic inner world of the individual. The more tending to, care of, and unburdening of the wounded parts that a person experiences, the quicker they return to normalcy (this is what resilience looks like) and the quicker the enemy (the trauma) is processed. If you want to be free of the effects of unprocessed trauma, then invest in the healing of pain not the coping mechanism that ignores the pain.

*“Sometimes the more force you use, the less effective it is...”*

This paradox is similar and connected to the previous. Ratcheting up the energy and effort to avoid pain, hide from others, and pretend nothing is wrong can easily create other traumas in the individual. Increased activity to avoid pain forces coping mechanisms into extreme roles. These investments fail to heal wounds that cause pain. This could look like more avoidance from friends, family, and community, more use of alcohol or drugs to keep the pain away, or more computer or pornography use to escape the discomfort of the emotional wounds. More force may temporarily have a soothing effect, but it causes the wounds to cry out, which tempts protectors to do more work. This serves as a feedback loop and creates collateral damage- new wounds of

broken relationships, loss of career, or even loss of life. The harder one tries to avoid pain, the more the pain is empowered. The healing path requires compassion and care for the hurting parts rather than force. Healing does not come by brute force. Healing comes by slowing down, tending to wounds, and nurturing them toward wholeness.

*“Sometimes the more success you have, less force is needed, and more risk is assumed...”*

Sometimes when we experience some measure of healing, we think, “Great! I am good to go. I don’t have to worry about this anymore. I can now move on.” So the protectors stand down, and life continues. Sometimes life brings more pain. That pain can remind us of the past and we begin to suffer again. This can be discouraging; we thought we were healed. Now we have a choice. We can shut down and withdraw again or we can stay vulnerable and open to a small healing community as we reposition for inner healing and begin to address the new (and old) wounds. Living life and enjoying the moment requires us to be open to what may come, including more pain. Part of knowing how far we are in the healing journey can be measured by how open we truly are to our family, friends, and community. Living is risky. Every commander knows that risk alone is no excuse for refusal to perform a mission. One must assume risk in order to achieve victory. Similarly, risking vulnerability, healthy accountability, and openness with a few others who care must happen in order to heal and enjoy life.

*“The host nation doing something tolerably is normally better than us doing it well...”*

You may or may not be responsible for your trauma, but you are responsible for your healing path. You are the key to your healing. No one can fix you. Fixing you cannot be done by a pill, a doctor, or a therapist. Your modest, most humble efforts at the pursuit of wholeness are like the host nation doing something, even if it is not up to standard. When this happens, the therapy, pills, or modality of treatment becomes energized and effective. Not only do you have to want to heal; you must have the courage to move out into the population and begin to care for what is hurting. When you cooperate with the healing community, you are not alone. You are supported. Imagine two extremes: the host nation never goes out on patrol or the COIN force never backs them up. The end result is the same- the insurgency grows. You must move out into uncomfortable territory with a ‘force’ of others who are experts and who are near. Healing takes action and community. Healing requires self-leadership.

So what are the key principles for a successful mission of inner healing? They include the following:

- Never attempt to enter “the hurting population” alone and without support.
- Be open to the advice and guidance of the experts, the healing community.
- Focus on the wound, doggedly chase the pain, and with compassion, treat it.
- Refuse to empower protective parts when you are not in the life-and-death moment.

- Have some compassion for the protector-parts; even though they fall into extreme roles, their intentions are often noble.
  - Recognize this type of mission takes time.
  - Recognize the battle space is complex and things are not as simple as you may believe; there may be a lot of pain that is connected and resonating from different experiences.
  - Take care of yourself during the process: sleep, eat, hydrate, and exercise.
  - Maintain a holistic approach to self care by addressing: the body, the mind, the emotions, the spirit, and your relationships.
  - Demand a holistic mode of therapy, such as the experiential types (Emotionally Focused Therapy or Internal Family Systems Therapy) rather than a monolithic mode of therapy.
    - This has all happened before, and it will all happen again, so realize your experience is common; you are not alone and your symptoms are not unique.
    - Your desire for wholeness is half the battle; stay motivated and never quit.
    - Openness, vulnerability, grieving, lamenting, and connection to others who are safe are your tools to heal.
    - Never neglect the spiritual dimension. Secular scientists (e.g. Peter Levine and Babette Rothschild) who study trauma indicate that an essential ingredient toward wholeness is addressing the spiritual dimension of a wounded person. Remember, spiritual does not necessarily equal religious. Everyone is a spiritual person (requiring connectedness to 'other'); not all are religious.

COIN is complex and costly. The benefit of success in COIN is a populace free of the oppression of an ideal that abuses power and control; a population that can enjoy life and be happy. The price of freedom is great, but it is worth the investment. Inner healing is no different. It is complex, often requiring the collaborative effort of the wounded person with many trained, experienced, and competent healing professionals. Movement into this complexity is messy and painful. But like many things in life, pain and effort are often prerequisites to liberty. Inner healing is also costly. It costs us time, energy, and sometimes money. It can cost us our comfort and pride. And it costs us in terms of courage and commitment. The complexity and cost of inner healing can feel counterintuitive, just like the paradoxes of counterinsurgency. But a Soldier's motivation should never come from emotions alone. Doing what is right can trump the feeling of uncertainty and what may seem counterintuitive. If it is to work, Soldiers must trust principles of COIN and prove it by their actions. All people who are stuck and hurting must trust the process of inner healing and prove it in word and deed.