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"THE BOMB THAT EXPLODED ME CONTINUES TO BLOW UP MY FAMILY..."

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This paper focuses on the unique unconscious processes that take place in families and couples who experienced loss from terror attacks.

Over the years Israel is exposed to different kinds of terror attacks that target civilian children and adults, in the most unexpected circumstances during everyday life.

Experience has taught me that in such circumstances unique unconscious processes take place.

Freud (1920) used the word "trauma" which means in Greek 'wound', to emphasize how the mind can be wounded by events which overwhelm mental processes by being too sudden or extreme to accommodate and process (1916).

Working for many years with families that experienced loss in terror attack I realize that **latent and overt aggression were the main emotional components** that endangered the family members as individuals and as a family unit by accumulating continuous destructive energy in new, various, and different emotional patterns.

Aggression is a known response to trauma. Freud, (1920) explained it as a person's attempt to control the traumatic situation by turning the passive role into an active role. Anna Freud (1936) explained it as a defense mechanism of identification with the aggressor.

The psychoanalytic view on trauma identifies that the impact of traumatic events upon the mind can only be treated through achieving a deeper knowledge of the particular meaning of those events for that individual, integrating it into the individual's conscious existence. The trauma touches and disrupts the core of the individual's identity, and may damage the individual's capacity to symbolize. Since the survivor can never be restored to a pre-trauma state, mourning is part of the therapeutic process, in addition to the mourning of the beloved dead family member. The need to face the extent of human destructiveness makes the task of therapy very difficult (Garland, 1998).

The "ball of fire" is uncontrollable in the family

According to Freud a "constancy principle" regulates the distribution of energy within an organism in order to keep the level of stimulation as close to zero as possible (1895:197, 1920:9).

When a bomb explodes and kills a family member, the deadly destructive energy penetrates the family system with its ongoing explosive quality and seeks a suitable container to absorb it, become its "host" and enable the release of its explosive material, 'freeing' the other family members.

Since containing excessive aggression means risking intra-psyche and interpersonal equilibrium the dreadful 'ball of fire' is thrown between the family members in their efforts to push it away. Severely traumatic event stirs up the unresolved pains and conflicts of childhood (Garland, 1998). In the case of terror attacks, it "magnetized" to existing undealt with - unconscious violent forces, hidden in the personality or in the relationships and 'uses' them as anchors.

The intensified aggression breaks former organizations of defenses, and can cause pathologic reactions like psychotic breakdown, suicide, divorce etc, even in families that had not suffered in the past from any emotional pathology. The symptomatic manifestations can be so removed from the origin that it can easily be misinterpreted as not being related to the death that had occurred earlier.

Thus, in addition to the difficult mourning processes, these families have to confront the intensified aggression that is locked-up within their family system, threatening to continue endless explosions from unexpected directions.

The therapeutic process

All the therapeutic functions that are relevant in object relations couple and family therapy can be applied to treatment of families that have experienced violent death of a family member:

- Opening the potential space for exploration
- holding relationships,
- And accepting individual and family projective identifications... feeding them back to the patient (Scharff and Scharff, 2000: 15).

In extreme family trauma the explosive nature of the aggression shapes all of the above emotional processes. If the process is not identified (by the therapist and then in the therapeutic process), therapy is conducted under ongoing threats of explosions from innumerable unexpected sources and directions, preventing the evolvment of a therapeutic safe space.

The therapeutic process demands:

- **Thorough family evaluation** of:
 - The patterns of relationships and how they have changed because of the trauma.
 - The emotional personality structure of the family members in order to identify unresolved repressed conflicts that might allow discharge of the explosive aggression.
 - Tracking the illusive path that the aggressive energy has taken in each family member and in the family dynamics.

- **Identifying vulnerable family members and relationship patterns** that are at risk to become the second-line 'absorbers,' once the first-line 'symptom presenters' will be treated (the 'weak vertebra', a 'scapegoat': etc);
- **Allowing a therapeutic process** that enables working-through of the identified undealt conflicts that put the certain person or relationship at risk;
- **Allowing space for the mourning process**, bearing in mind that the aggressive forces in the family are still striving to be released;
- **Containing the acute violent forces**. This makes it possible for family members to meet their extreme rage and work-it through;
- **Forming new patterns** of relationships and personality dynamics.

Treatment can never take away the pain of the violent death of a loved one. Nor will the family ever return to their past emotional dynamics. But treatment can safeguard the family from a chain-response of continuous intensive crises. And at the same time, allow them to experience a process of growth and development on their way to continuing their life in a new equilibrium.

The Buckle Family

Avi, 68 years old and Hadar 66 years old are the parents of two sons (Eran and Eli), a daughter (Mia) and grandparents of ten grandchildren. They have been married for 40 years in what can be described as a quite "good tense" relationship. Disputes were part of their normal relationship pattern, and centered most of the time on his frequent business travels abroad. Avi's father had left the family when Avi was four. Avi never forgave him but did not talk about it.

Hadar came from a strict patriarchal family. When she was 7 years old her mother was killed by an Arab sniper and she was raised by her father's second wife, whom she did not like. The Buckles appeared to be a mainstream family that led a rich economic, social and family life.

Hadar was the center of the extended family. The children fulfilled the parents' expectations; all were married to 'the right' spouses, held respectable jobs and lead 'decent lives.'

The idyllic picture was shattered when their first born son Eran was killed. "One morning" Hadar told me: "I heard on the news that a suicide bomber exploded himself in a commercial center in Tel-Aviv, I knew immediately that Eran was killed, I called Avi and shouted: let's go to the hospital... I arrived and screamed 'I am Eran's mother, I want to see him, but it was too late.'"

From this moment their lives changed, "the destructive energy" penetrated the family attacking interpersonal relationships and internal equilibrium.

The therapeutic climate was constantly changing because of the burst of new centers of aggression which provoked life-threatening crises in the family. As Scharff and Scharff (1979:170) describe: "in psychoanalytic couple and family therapy by providing the time, space the structure we offer "provision of frame" in which work can go on... the setups need to be adequate and appropriate to the job to be done..."

Thorough family evaluation

a) Patterns of relationship in the nuclear family

A closer look inside the 'perfect family façade' revealed a **passive - aggressive pattern between the parents** which pronounced itself through Hadar's ongoing accusations and Avi's complying, yet never satisfying, reaction pattern.

The mother-child relational pattern was controlled by the **mother's 'victim' position**. The children were always aware 'how not to upset mother' who had endless reasons to be upset. The only **exception was Hadar's relationship with her eldest son Eran**, whom she loved the most and felt that he, and everything he did, was **perfect**. This caused his siblings to feel **jealous** which was reverse to complying behavior by trying to be 'as good as Eran.'

Hadar said: "the minute he was born I looked into his big blue eyes and I knew that he is special. I love all my children but with him it was

always something else..." Only after his death, in one of the individual sessions, the secret origin of this special love started to unfold and with it the multi layers of the family jealousy ...

b) Identifying vulnerable family members and relationship patterns

The most vulnerable family member who was at-risk to absorb the aggressive energy was Hadar who as a young child lost her mother in a similar situation and since then has carried a burden of suppressed unconscious, undealt-with emotional conflicts. Probably her controlling relationship pattern with her family served as a defense against those feelings.

Indeed, shortly after Eran's death Hadar's relationship with her family deteriorated, she 'fired' destructive aggression in all directions. Like 'cards in a row,' aggressive conflicts were exploding among different family members.

- During the individual sessions Hadar told me that she married Avi as a replacement for a relationship with an ex - lover that her father objected to. It became clear that she transmitted her emotions for her ex-lover to her first born child Eran. The blocked love flooded her uncontrollably. The ex-lover heard in the news that her son was killed and called her. The love between them burst forth again. She considered marrying him. This libidinal energy served as a 'pain-killer' for her grief. But the combination of destructive aggression and unacceptable libidinal attraction was too much to handle at the same time.
- The tension between Avi and Hadar became more intense and aggressive.
- Being in a 'symbiotic' relationship with her children Hadar penetrated their individual and married space carrying with her destructive aggression.
- New and old conflicts in the young couples reactivated, especially between the daughter who was identifying with her mother and her husband. They were considering divorce.

- The hidden conflict between Eran's 'two wives': Naomi the widow and Hadar deteriorated to a point where Naomi did not allow Hadar to see her grandchildren anymore.
- The destructive aggression moved to the third generation, making them the next vulnerable candidates. The process was escalating to a point of suicidal thoughts in Eran's eldest son, who, in addition to the loss of his father, lost the connection to his father's family.
- Hadar's aggression which did not fully explode yet, was targeted towards herself and she became weaker, sicker, thinner and angrier almost to a point where her life was in danger.
- Avi's undealt anger towards his disappearing father was reactivated; flooding him and serving at the same time as a distraction from his son's death.
- Eli's anger toward his father who was not there for him throughout his childhood was reactivated. A tense gap opened between them, manifesting itself in sarcastic remarks from Eli toward his father on family occasions and with long periods of detached silence.
- Avi became more and more isolated within his own family and therefore a good candidate to become the next vulnerable distractive – aggression - absorber.
- Avi became involved in Mia's life. Mia's marriage crisis served as diversion from his grief and a solution for his emotional isolation in the family, since he 'was called upon' to help his daughter and could not 'indulge' himself in his own undealt-with emotional crisis.

c) Unfolding, differentiating and working through

It was clear that the whole family was at risk, with the aggressive energy moving from one generation to the other. The next disaster 'was written on the wall.' Since the multiple crises were chain reactions to the terror attack, not all the crises needed to be treated. I choose to treat four centers which I thought would stop the dangerous distractive process:

- Hadar's emotional dynamics;
- Avi's emotional dynamics;
- Hadar and Avi's marriage;
- Mia and Uri's marriage.

Since the suicide threats were situated in the third generation, I felt that stopping the process in the first and second generation would 'free' the grandchildren. In order to allow Hadar to work on her relationship with her ex-lover, I met Hadar and Avi separately and as a couple. I met Mia and Uri in couple therapy. The therapeutic process continued for three years.

Treatment process

- In Hadar's individual psychotherapy she **became aware that her love for her ex-lover was the origin of her special love towards Eran**. Her ex-lover's return into her life made it possible to **confront her genuine feelings**, rather than fantasized feelings, towards him.
- She **re-lived the mourning for her mother including her anger** towards her. This made it easier for her to go through a **separation-individuation process from her mother and from her children** as well.
- Avi **worked on his undealt-with anger** towards his father. A new space opened in him. He could face his emotional difficulty in engaging in meaningful warm relationships with his sons. Consequently his relationship with Eli improved.
- The above processes unchained Hadar and Avi's present relationships from the pull of past unconscious conflicts, and paved the road in couple therapy to be able to discuss old conflicts while allowing for different points of view and emotional needs. Towards the end of therapy, Avi's new intimacy with his son Eli began to raise new tensions in Hadar's and Eli's relationship, pushing them back to their 'good, but sometimes tense' familiar relationship pattern.

- Mia and Uri's couple therapy **was centered on boundaries** at the different levels of family relations.
- **New norms of relationship:** legitimating: emotions, needs and wishes' expressions, and boundaries around personal and shared space started to penetrate the family unit through the family members in therapy.

d) Making space for the mourning process and containing the acute violent forces

During the therapeutic mourning process, the released destructive aggression meshed with their grief, especially with the anger. Bursts of extreme pain, torturous feelings, violent anger, grief and much more flooded the family members shaking them and leaving them helpless to these extreme uncontrollable forces.

In these stages I needed to function as a reliance container who could absorb the extreme intensity, and not be destroyed by it and also to be able to allow feelings to be expressed in words and thus legitimate 'digestible' expressions. Understanding the underlying dynamics helped me to be able to do this. Once the destructive – aggression could be released in the therapeutic safe space, a working-through process became possible. Stage by stage the grip of the explosive energy loosened and the family formed new equilibrium patterns.

Forming new patterns

Hadar decided not to leave her husband and they went back to their "normal-tense" relationship. Boundaries and personal space replaced the symbiotic relationship between Hadar and her children, making it possible for Mia and Uri to build their marriage. For the first time, Hadar permitted herself to tell her children when she was too tired to invite them for the weekend meals and when she did not want to baby-sit for her grandchildren. Hadar now, calmer, made peace with her daughter-in-law and gained healthier relationships with her dead son's children. Her grandchild no longer had suicidal thoughts. With the widow's cooperation Hadar took upon herself the role of telling

Eran's children stories about Eran's childhood, a role that gave her a new constructive status in their family. All the family members formed new patterns of more satisfying relationships.

Towards the end of the therapy the entire family engaged in Eran's memorial project.

Conclusion

Time did not allow for more detailed description of the therapeutic process, nor for detailing aspects of transference and counter-transference which in family and couple therapy is a tool for influencing more directly the several focused transferences and are the major organizers of the therapist's understanding (Scharff and Scharff, 1979).

I have tried to show special aspects of family and couple therapy under extreme trauma. The family, and with them the therapist, faced extreme levels of destructive aggression that expanded, flowed and overwhelmed all the intra-psychic and inter-relational levels, crossing-over generations and in inner internalized emotional relationships, in its flow to continue to explode.

These conditions create unpredicted strenuous crises. The therapist is required to perform complex therapeutic functions: throughout therapy an ongoing 'diagnostic eye' must be open to individuals and to the family as a unit, including those who are outside the therapeutic circle; with attentiveness to the route that the destructive energy takes once its current hosts were treated, identify the focal points of life risks and intervene. At the same time a safe space for the therapist and the family, which enables undisturbed therapeutic work to take place, needs to be created.

Serving as a container in both functions simultaneously, with the awareness to transference and counter-transference processes places high emotional demand on the therapist, who is required not to fall into an omnipotent stance in order to cope.

Further identification for treatment of the different characteristics of families in extreme trauma needs to be done.

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