



COALITION FOR WORK WITH PSYCHOTRAUMA AND PEACE KOALICIJA ZA RAD SA PSIHOTRAUMOM I MIR

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Giving permission to one's self and to other people is one of the most important concepts that I use with clients. Many people don't do it. I'll explain this on the basis of some people whom I've seen.

Males are particularly vulnerable to not giving themselves permission. Males "are not permitted" to have emotions, to show "weakness" or vulnerability, or even to be angry. They hold it all inside. Eventually, inevitably, it explodes and hurts people around them and in the society. They then feel shame and guilt, which also are forbidden feelings. Thus, saying to someone that he has permission to be sad, to be angry, to feel frustrated, is extremely important. One former soldier with whom I worked a number of years ago was afraid to tell his wife about his post-traumatic reactions and about what he had experienced during the war, because he thought that it would hurt her. She was afraid of his frequent outbursts, as were his children. First, separately with me and later in a meeting of the entire family, she said that she would rather hear it so that she could understand him and assist him. His children said the same. Thus, by getting the traumas out into the open and by opening the lines of communication, the family started in the direction of healing. I, but more than I, she, gave him permission to feel what he was feeling and to express that, and not to be ashamed of it or to feel guilty about it.

Another barrier is societal norms. During the war, a woman's husband died of a heart attack, thus not from the bombs or guns. During a group meeting, she was obviously upset, and I asked her what it was. Her reaction, which struck me at the time and which I have heard many times since, was, "Oh, is it really all right for me to mourn for him, especially in the light of what other people here have been though because of the war?". Again, the societal norms of how to react during the war stopped her from expressing her grief. This certainly is not the worst example of that that I have heard.

Still another example is people – men and women – who have been sexually, physically, and psychologically abused, particularly by close relatives, such as parents. Frequently, they feel that must love the relative, "because he is my father" and "because my mother did it for my own good". Thus, without the permission from someone from the outside, the person cannot feel the anger or the hatred or the sadness. Rather, again, the person feels guilt and shame. This is compounded by

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the abuser, and frequently by others, telling the victim that “you must not say anything”. Expressing things, and feeling the actual feelings, is a first step in the healing process.

A similar group of people is those who are the victims of trans-generational transmission of psychological trauma. These people are numerous in virtually every society, whether the society has undergone war or natural disaster or slavery or some other trauma. Frequently, these people don’t understand what they are feeling and why they are feeling it. Thus, again, the healing process begins when they understand it and have the permission to allow it to become part of them.

Still another aspect of permission comes from politics and societal norms. Here, and even in Western cultures, people have fear of standing up for things that they don’t believe in, because they are afraid that they will be repressed by governments and will be shunned by their neighbors and others in society, and that there might even be legal consequences and/or discrimination against them. Many times, their neighbors have similar standpoints, but no one will talk about them publically. Thus, a conspiracy of silence ensues. Again, they need permission to stand up for what they believe in, both their standpoints and their feelings.

The bottom line here is that people need to look at what is going on inside them and give themselves, and others, the permission to get it out.