

Trauma
and
the desire for revenge



Michael Etts, LCSW-C, ACH
<http://www.adaptivetherapy.com>

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Trauma and the desire for revenge

How it starts

“Vengeance is a lazy form of grief.
from the movie “The Interpreter”

We wake in the morning and there are tasks to complete. Work and responsibilities are discharged and as they are, we gain a sense of mastery and accomplishment. Trauma, a sudden, disorienting and deeply painful event, disrupts all that. All the sense of order, of being in control, is violated. And there was nothing that could be done to stop it.

Natural disasters are one type of trauma and they rarely prompt an internal desire for revenge. But when the trauma was intentionally inflicted by another person or group, the intensity and passion for revenge can be significant. It is a desire that results from many feelings and needs, as Mardi J. Horowitz, M.D., notes:

Hate toward perpetrators burns at the core of revenge fantasies, but often a medley of emotions is present. These include anger at perpetrators, fear that no rescuer can be trusted, despair over the harshness of the world, and a general disgust with the injustices of the world. Self-disgust over allowing vulnerability is often present [...] The victim can feel good about gaining a sense of power and control by planning vengeance and may experience pleasure at imagining the suffering of the target and pride at being on the side of some spiritual primal justice. (Horowitz, 2007, p. 24)

There are many losses that a survivor of trauma must contend with. The belief that all people are basically good must be re-assessed.

Assumptions about safety must be replaced with new awareness of danger. Ideas about justice, fairness and mercy must be able to contain what the survivor has now experienced.

With so much lost and so much recovery work to be done, the idea of a single all-encompassing solution is alluring. The idea of revenge can appear to offer all that. It would right the commission of a wrong; it would discharge anger and reinstate a feeling of power. Previous feelings of helplessness would be replaced by efficacy and mastery. Who could argue with that?

Those who dare not seek revenge

Not everyone can entertain the thought of exacting revenge on those who have traumatized them. If you are dependent on the victimizer, you run the risk of retaliatory measures. So a prisoner of war may have revenge fantasies but would be well advised to keep them hidden.

An even more vulnerable group is victimized children. Not only are they dependent for their material needs but they are also highly dependent emotionally. Studies show that children are apt to direct the anger and urge for revenge at themselves or someone other than the caretaker. As Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., writes

Children are even more likely to blame themselves [...] Anger directed against the self or others is always a central problem in the life of people who have been violated (van der Kolk, 1989).

The age of the child is an important determining factor in how much aggression is directed at the self.

“The earlier the abuse, the more self-directed the aggression. Abuse during early childhood and latency was strongly correlated with suicide attempts, self-mutilation, and other self-injurious behaviors” (van der Kolk, 1996, p. 190).

But does it work?

Revenge is portrayed frequently in the movies and the story almost always ends after the revenge is complete. The revenge taker walks away, usually a bit bloodied, with no apparent self doubt or guilt. Movie makers are in tune with the popular desire for vicarious revenge and they don't bother with the

messy aftermath that actual revenge brings. For example, in the movie “In the Bedroom” the father of a murdered child takes revenge, killing his son’s murderer. After the murder, he comes home and his wife makes him breakfast. No consequences, no guilt. Everything is back to normal.

The reality though, is a bit more complicated. However intriguing in the abstract, the actual act of revenge requires acts of cruelty and human indifference. The goal of reducing the symptoms of the original trauma is not attained because the memory is still there. Now however, the survivor has the added task of reconciling their self image with this new behavior. And a new horrifying memory has been added to an already existing one. As Judith Herman, M.D. notes, those who act out the revenge fantasy are likely to suffer more:

Though the traumatized person imagines that revenge will bring relief, repetitive revenge fantasies actually increase her torment. Violent, graphic revenge fantasies may be as arousing, frightening, and intrusive as images of the original trauma. They exacerbate the victim's feelings of horror and degrade her image of herself. They make her feel like a monster. They are also highly frustrating, since revenge can never change or compensate for the harm that was done. People who actually commit acts of revenge, such as combat veterans who commit atrocities, do not succeed in getting rid of their post-traumatic symptoms; rather, they seem to suffer the most severe and intractable disturbances (Hermann,1992, p.189)

If not revenge, what?

“ Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one getting burned.
Buddha

Every person will come to terms with trauma in a different way. Some will gather enough support from family, friends, church and community. Others will reach out for additional help from self-help and 12-step groups, as well as from therapy. Some will go to a lodge of fellow veterans, to gain the camaraderie that grows out of similar life experience.

A worrisome sign would be if you start to withdraw from those around you and stop seeking support from people who care about you. The truth is that we are social creatures and when under stress, we need one another even more. Studies show that “[...] adults are still intensely dependent upon

social support to prevent and overcome traumatization, and under threat they still may cry out for their mothers” (van der Kolk, 1989).

As times passes and you process the trauma in your own way, you will find that the trauma occupies less and less of your thoughts. You will gradually lose interest in those who have caused the trauma, eventually to the point of indifference. What will matter to you is the life that lays before you; this day, this hour and this moment. And that is where you want to be...

Finally, a story

The tale of two captains

Two ships are sailing to deliver their goods to a foreign port.

While en route, a pirate ship attacks them both. Both the ships begin taking on water.

Both captains are intelligent and start to plug the holes.

But the first captain is more focused on his right to claim revenge. He quickly patches the holes and begins to returning fire, even though his guns can no longer reach the pirate ship. Incensed, he begins pursuit of the pirate. "This will not stand, I will not allow it" exclaimed the captain. As he resolutely pursues the pirate, his cargo spoils and he will not be paid for the voyage. And his boat continues to leak...

The second captain, while equally angry, sets out to completely repair his boat. While he would like to pursue the pirate, he knows that he must deliver his cargo and get paid for the journey. He wants revenge but he comes to terms with the fact that sometimes, life is unfair, even cruel. "Sure, I would like to get even with the pirate. But what am I going to do, risk sinking my own boat? I will deliver my cargo, as promised." And so he did.

If the opportunity to get justice ever comes up, this captain would gladly take it. And he decides to add a lookout to the forward mast, so that he won't be surprised by pirates again.

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