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NON-COGNITIVE TRAUMA ARTICLES

FIREFIGHTER'S TRAUMA

ADAPTATION: A TEEN'S TRAUMA

A NEIGHBORHOOD'S TRAUMA

IF MEMORIALS MAKE YOU SICK--DON'T GO.

FIREFIGHTER'S TRAUMA

Copyright 1992, Ilana Singer

**Written for "Therapist Column" in *East Bay Journal*,
a newspaper for the 1991 Oakland, California Firestorm Victims.**

Dear Firefighter,

Even the terror of those Viet Cong mortar and rocket attacks in 1964 paled on October 20th when you were trapped for 6 hours by a circle of flames. "I've never seen anything like that in my 18 years of firefighting, never been so scared in my life," you said, remembering how flames licked at your face as you and 7 other firefighters blasted water to stop the inferno from incinerating you. But, because of your fire training, all of you survived.

After your fire engine maneuvered around burning cars, downed lines, and blazing houses, you finally reached lower Broadway Terrace. By this time, you'd been sucking in hot air, soot, and smoke for 12 hours; your lungs were damaged, your eyes singed and swollen, but you refused to leave your crew.

Instead, you kept wetting down houses you thought could be saved. When you saw glowing embers or smoldering leaves in a house's rain gutters, you knew from experience the house was already lost; so, you fought to save the one next door. Finally, in a rain of red embers, your lungs and eyes gave out. You were ordered to the hospital.

As you lay in bed that week, disturbing memories from South Vietnam and the East Bay fire hounded you: bombed out jungle bunkers, bloodied limbs, burning flesh and broken bodies, screaming. Hot cyclonic winds, a hillside of flaming houses, smoke-blackened sky. These images wouldn't leave your mind and the normal reaction to trauma hit--depression. Even though you're a professional firefighter, a veteran to trauma, you're not immune to its personal effects--each time you meet something as horrible as the hill inferno, you'll react, just like any other human being.

But, while you were recuperating at home in Oakland, you didn't tell your wife the gruesome details. After 25 years of marriage, she knows you face danger; but, you told me, "She doesn't need to know how close we came to dying in this fire." One night after dinner, your wife complained, "I was talking to you, but you didn't hear me." She was right. Your mind had slipped back to the burning house you had to abandon, and, as you often do, you were questioning, "Did I do everything I could?"

You pulled your attention back to the table, to your wife cuddling your visiting granddaughter. Again, your wife asked, "Is Baby's slashed finger healing properly?" Your 6' frame towered over the toddler as you kissed her three stitches. But, her injury is minor compared with the horror you've witnessed.

Nevertheless, your granddaughter's visit helps speed up your emotional healing. You call her, "The cutest little girl you ever saw," especially when she tugs on your thumbs, coaxing you to sing to her. Whenever you picture her, you laugh. Focusing on her antics distracts you from your vivid memories; then, you feel better.

A few weeks later, almost back to your good-natured, steady self, you return to your 24-hour shift at the fire station and your four-man crew. In the morning, you inspect hill properties for dead wood, dry grass and debris; in the afternoon, your lieutenant assigns housekeeping chores and equipment repair. For dinner, Red, the engineer, cooks his mean chili; and, at bedtime Jerry, the other hoseman, snores as soon as he falls asleep. You're glad to be back in the company of these guys--together you survived the inferno.

Then, one afternoon again on the TV News, you heard reporters bashing the Oakland and Berkeley fire departments. You plummeted. "It hurt," you told me. "What did they expect? Maybe I should have jumped into the fire. Would that make them happy?"

Yet, there were days you felt appreciated, when anonymous hill residents left fruit baskets at your

firehouse doorstep and coffee shop owners served free pastries to all firefighters.

Over breakfast, your crew, the guys who understand better than anyone what you've been through, observe the unspoken rule: Don't dwell on the horrors because you can't afford to carry them home. Instead of talking about the lady's scarred face or what people will do without their houses, you review rescue tactics, medical procedures and new fire strategies. This is the real work of the firefighter.

Ilana Singer, Clinical-Director, Women's Division, Center for Counter-Conditioning Therapy®, Oakland, California wrote this column for victims of the 1991 Oakland firestorm that destroyed over 3000 homes, and killed 52 people. Find her book, *EMOTIONAL RECOVERY AFTER NATURAL DISASTERS: HOW TO GET BACK TO NORMAL LIFE*, at Amazon.com.

ADAPTATION: A TEEN'S TRAUMA

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Dear Erik,

The oven-dry winds blew dust into your face this morning as you bicycled to meet me at you family's cleared lot on your burned-out street. Before the fire, parched days meant swimming at Lake Temescal, shooting baskets and barbecuing with your neighborhood buddies and their families.

As you near the lot, the desert winds shift suddenly, reminding you, not of summer fun, but of danger. Today's conditions mimic last October's when the dragon's breath torched your beloved hills.

You jump off your bike and we walk around looking at what's left of your old home's foundation. "Sure I'm, glad my parents will rebuild," you tell me, "but actually, I'm waiting for the people to come back, mostly for my friends." After all, the five of you, have played together on this block

since you were all in diapers 15 years ago.

Sadly, you point out two grassy lots with SOLD signs swaying. Over there your best buddies, Mick and Tony, used to live, but there are not returning. Their parents gave up on rebuilding--the insurance settlements were inadequate, the emotional storms too painful. Quietly, you tell me, "It'll be weird, lonely without them." When you think how you'll miss the surprise refrigerator raids, Halloween parties, and shooting baskets, your stomach starts to ache.

Without Mick and Tony, you don't know what to expect. You crave what was. You picture it in your mind. But, you know the 50-year-old-houses and the pine and redwood forest will not return--exactly. Instead, a mixture of old and new will emerge--The Phoenix.

Yet, you can't picture the new. So you imagine what it will be like sleeping in your own old bedroom when it's rebuilt. But, then, you think, "my window will be overlooking a vacant lot and strangers will be moving in across the street." And, you know for months you'll be hearing the sounds of buzz saws and cranes. Erik, you will adapt, out of necessity. In fact, the bombardment of dramatic changes since October has forced you and all the other fire survivors into an unwanted adaptation exercise, an exercise demanding mental flexibility to get through these hard months.

You've also had help. Your high school counselor, "a cool lady," was there. In her cozy office, you and 20 other disoriented, burned-out school mates plopped onto big pillows and confided your fears. Your counselor explained that your exhaustion and disorganization, a normal reaction to trauma, would continue for awhile. She was always available when you wanted to talk privately, yet she knew when to back off and when to encourage all of you to support each other, outside the group meetings.

As we walk past the lots on Broadway Terrace, you tell me also how your fire friends helped you. They knew, without explanation, how much effort it took you to get organized enough just to go to the movies. Like you, sometimes, they actually wanted to stay close to their parents where they felt safer. And, that afternoon when, without permission, the "looky-loo" snapped a picture of you sifting through the ashes, your friends felt as indignant as you.

But, your non-fire friends took care of you in ways your fire friends couldn't. They brought you photos out of their albums and built you a basketball hoop at your temporary house. They encouraged you to go back to your clarinet, Boy Scouts and track. Now, just as "hyped" as you, they can't wait until August to watch the fresh concrete being poured for your new home's foundation. "It'll be monumental," you tell me excitedly.

Still, you wish that Mick, Tony and all your fire friends could share your enthusiasm; but, many seem apathetic, so you don't tell them your happy news anymore. "How can I feel good when they feel bad?" you ask yourself. Stop Erik. Consider this: Your taking on their unhappiness will not help them to feel better. Besides, who told you that because others feel blue, you must match their

mood?

You even told me you don't want to focus on pain anymore. Just before school let out, an outside "expert consultant" came to your school and tried to start another fire "bonding" group. "I resent these `do-gooders' coming in," you said, "they're annoying, unaware that I've moved on. I'm sick of telling the Oct. 20th story--I don't need ignorant `experts' trying to comfort me."

You're right, Erik. Beware of "experts" who want you to relive trauma and disaster. Some of their popular theories can disrupt the delicate process of healing because they pry open what you've already mentally finished--grieving. As you said Erik, "The fire has moved from the front of my mind to the back." And that's where you want it to stay.

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A NEIGHBORHOOD'S TRAUMA

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Dear Stacia,

As we sit together, you turn on a TV news video of the fire burning up your neighborhood. Having jumped the freeway, the flames head straight for your porch, but suddenly leap across the street. "I was lucky," you say, clicking off the VCR.

Where porch lights once welcomed you home from the classroom, now you look out and only blackness stares back. Often, you still feel scared. Everytime you look out your window or leave your house, you tell me, you're reminded that the fire ate up everyone else's home but yours.

Since Oct. 20th, your home of twenty years has become the neighborhood "community center," an oasis of normalcy and familiarity for close survivor friends and other burned out neighbors. Many stop by to use the toilet, borrow tools, or just to talk out their frustration.

A few months ago, Mary, a neighbor you'd barely known before the fire, came to your front door asking to use your telephone. But she needed more than the phone--soon, she was sobbing in your arms. Listening to Mary's sorrow, you felt helpless, unable to take away her pain. Three hours later, having regained her composure, she drove back to her rented Emeryville apartment. She had emotionally unloaded; but, now, you were emotionally spent, drained.

Stacia, during our long friendship, I've seen your sensitivity to people in pain. So, I'm not surprised that when needy neighbors knocked on your door, you fed them, baby-sat, or spent hours comforting.

But, you told me how often you awoke worrying about their problems. You had to battle many nights of guilt before you could decide, "I can open my refrigerator, but I just can't be an emotional sponge."

You're discovering, Stacia, emotion drains energy. Without an endless supply of energy, you can't afford to absorb everyone's pain. After all, you need to conserve it for your husband and two kids, and for your students. It's time to limit yourself; you're not responsible for every fire survivor. Knock off the guilty business! Save yourself for your closest survivor friends.

But, even your survivor friends have no idea about the fire's impact on you. You have remained silent, thinking that you had no right to complain. After all, they lost everything, you keep emphasizing. But, Stacia, although you didn't lose your house, you're a victim too--you remained behind, isolated in the wasteland. The displaced survivors see this grotesque place only when they visit. You see it everyday.

For months after the fire, lights flickered and shadows leered at you. At first, you were so scared you refused to sleep at home until your electricity stayed on. Then, every night, you dreaded the dark walk from your car to your front door.

You've seen all the stages: removal of burned-out cars, downed lines and chimneys; cleared lots and the following lull; then, the flowers bloomed. You felt excited as you picked a bouquet from the lots across the street. As you put it in a vase, images of the displaced neighbors who used to live there began to haunt you. You wonder how you can be calm one moment, and then abruptly switch to a deep sadness. You ask me, "Am I being too sensitive?"

No, Stacia. That's just how you are. All people respond to changes around them, but each person has a different level of sensitivity. You are just affected more deeply and more frequently than many.

That's why now, almost one year later, the feelings haven't gone away. You still feel strange walking on Sunday mornings in an eerily quiet neighborhood, without birds or trees, where prickly weeds crack open the sidewalks. You feel disoriented until you see a familiar street sign. "When I see Ocean View Drive," you tell me, "I'm reassured. I know where I am."

You walk with me outside to my car. We hear a cricket. You point out the new frame across the way. Tonight is special, it's the first time since the fire that all the street lights are on. You say joyfully, "Another sign the neighborhood is coming back."

For now, Stacia, that's what you must keep doing to counteract your upsetting thoughts--keep checking the familiar landmarks, Ocean View Drive, Big Tree and Audrey's house lights; and, keep focusing on the signs of renewal--signs of the Phoenix.

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**LETTERS TO THE THERAPIST:
IF MEMORIALS MAKE YOU SICK--DON'T GO.**

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Dear Therapist,

I suppose the memorials for October 20th are good for most people, but I have no glee, no joy. I only feel angry. I don't need photographs and gardens to remind me of the fire, I am living with its fury everyday. When I saw Hurricane Andrew's devastation I felt sick, I know just what those people are going through. Angry

Dear Angry,

Yes, memorials of a devastating event can wrench your mental moorings; once again the fire becomes vividly real. Instead of letting photographs, personal stories and T.V. reruns depress you further, don't feel obligated to participate. Turn the day into "a visit" with old friends, especially ones you've not seen during this year, go to a concert, a movie, or "go fishing." While many survivors will be memorializing Oct. 20th and inviting you to participate, there will be plenty of others who won't. Everyone reacts differently.

Dear Therapist: I worry about my husband. We moved to Hiller Highlands after he retired 8 years ago. When he was chief engineer responsible for billion dollar projects, he suffered stress symptoms that since the fire have returned: headaches, indigestion, neck and back pains. He's found so many stupid errors in the builder's work that he often wakes up at night thinking about how to check, investigate and double-check. He's constantly tired and irritable; but, when our daughter calmly tells him to sack or sue the builder, he starts yelling and says, "I know what I'm doing. I'm not going to pay that thief until he does it right." When the house is finally built, I don't want to live there as a widow. R.D.

Dear R.D.

Most competent people want things to be done "right" and many get aggravated at "stupid people doing stupid things." Even patient people have a tolerance limit--sounds as though your husband has reached his. He's probably suffering from an accumulation of aggravation. You recognize the physical toll it's taking, does he?

Tell him this: Anger can be helpful and anger can also sabotage. Anger is a problem when its intensity overrides common sense. The key to surviving this rebuilding ordeal is to use his angry energy constructively--for his own benefit--not for teaching a code of ethics to con men.

For you, remember: This is your husband's emotional style. At least he's able to do something and is not immobilized by a victim's plight.

Dear Therapist,

I took a six month leave from the lab without pay because I needed all my strength and energy to coordinate rebuilding my house. But now, with permits delayed, the process is stalled. I feel out of sorts as though I should be using this free time productively, either taking a vacation or returning to my research. But I couldn't possibly enjoy a trip and I'm too preoccupied to accomplish serious research. C.J.

Dear C.J.

You're falling for old commands that shout "Use Free Time Productively." If you'd not been traumatized and displaced, most likely you'd be rushing to finish lab write-ups by 4 p.m. so you could hit the gym, grab dinner and get to the symphony. But, since the fire trauma, you can't operate in this old way.

You're still in a state of limbo, grappling and adapting to the upheaval of your world. You must ignore that inner voice commanding you to "accomplish." Ignore its whining complaint, "You're wasting time." Instead, compromise with yourself. Instead of taking an airplane or peering into a petri dish, just do one useful, small task. Then, reward yourself with an easy and enjoyable break--a nap, or perhaps browse in a local bookstore. Keep alternating tiny tasks with simple rewards. And soon you'll notice you're feeling more directed.

Eventually your temporary "in limbo state" will fade and you'll be able to resume the "accomplish" mentality, when you feel more prepared.

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