Research teaches us that people who are suicide bereaved (suicide survivors) are at statistically higher risk of suicide than the general population. The fact that suicide survivors often experience post-traumatic stress is also well known. Because of our higher risk and the often severe trauma responses experienced, I recommend van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* as an important read for loss-survivors. He describes the history of trauma research and current neuroscience discoveries that outline exactly how our bodies process trauma. The following excerpt from his book is a close description of what many survivors experience:

“…the engines of posttraumatic reactions are located in the emotional brain. In contrast with the rational brain, which expresses itself in thoughts, the emotional brain manifests itself in physical reactions: gut-wrenching sensations, heart pounding, breathing becoming fast and shallow, feelings of heartbreak, speaking with an uptight and reedy voice...The emotions and physical sensations that were imprinted during the trauma are experienced not as memories but as disruptive physical reactions in the present.” (p.206)

This is a profoundly important point—after trauma the place that is the holding the hurt is not accessible via rational thinking. Survivors can be triggered by a single word, often causing frightening reactions that are experienced as a present-time event years after a loss occurred. Trauma registers in our viscera in ways that our rational mind is unaware. The idea that one can consciously will one’s way out of trauma to simply “get over it” is mistaken.

“Almost every brain-imaging study of trauma patients finds abnormal activation of the insula. This part of the brain integrates and interprets the input from the internal organs—including our muscles, joints, and balance (proprioceptive) system—to generate the sense of being embodied. The insula can transmit signals to the amygdala that trigger fight/flight responses. This does not require any cognitive input or any conscious recognition that something has gone awry—you just feel on edge and unable to focus or, at worst, have a sense of imminent doom. These powerful feelings are generated deep inside the brain and cannot be eliminated by reason or understanding.” (p.249)

To begin to heal survivors have to find a way to “befriend” our inner experience. I’ve noticed that many have trouble approaching this notion, instead opting for avoidance and distraction strategies hoping to avoid feeling the pain of loss. van der Kolk tells us:

“Research has shown that the only way we can consciously access the emotional brain is through self-awareness, i.e., by activating the medial prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that notices what is going on inside us and thus allows us to feel what we’re feeling...Neuroscience research shows that the only way we can change the way we feel is by becoming aware of our inner experience and learning to befriend what is going on inside ourselves.” (p. 208)

He describes various ways of gaining *interoception* (looking inside): through movement; mindfulness practice; EMDR; yoga; communal rhythm; theater and more. Such practices can help trauma survivors access and release the internal systems that are trapped in primitive fright/flight reactivity and thereby return to a state of internal equilibrium.

Another important neuroscience discovery is that there are two different kinds of self-awareness. One is autobiographical that we create as a self-narrative, a rational process that takes place over time, helping us make sense of our lives. The second system is an in-the-moment awareness, which is not related to cognitive thinking, instead being based solely on our physical sensations. Bessel van der Kolk writes,
“These two ways of knowing are localized in different parts of the brain that are largely disconnected from each other. Only the system devoted to self-awareness, which is based in the medial prefrontal cortex, can change the emotional brain...One system creates a story for public consumption, and if we tell that story often enough, we are likely to start believing that it contains the whole truth. But the other system registers a different truth: how we experience the situation deep inside. It is this second system that needs to be accessed, befriended, and reconciled.” (p.238)

I want to emphasize how important it has been for me to read these passages! As a survivor doing outreach with other survivors I know from experience the importance of being present and allowing another's truth to be not only expressed but held with compassion. I know from my own experience that trying to move away from the pain of loss before experiencing it in a felt way—with all the discomfort that involves—is ultimately not helpful. When people hope to soften grief with encouraging words it actually does a disservice to the bereaved who are in need of being truly and deeply heard. I have learned all of this over years of experience but now I better understand the science behind it.

When one tries to side-step grief through any variety of distractions we discover that the next loss triggers even greater reactivity and renewed hurt, very like revisiting the beginning again. Trying to avoid uncomfortable feelings is counter-productive. Bessel van der Kolk explains: “...traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside.” (pp.98-99)

Until approaching the difficult work of embracing our pain, it is common to get lost in avoidance strategies. The Body Keeps the Score enumerates the physiological reasons why, in the long run, avoidance does not help. Healing after trauma is not quick or easy but it is possible to move through difficulty when we grow in awareness about what is real; eventually becoming able to offer to ourselves and others compassion and forgiveness in place of anger and blame.

In my experience, mindfulness was a lifesaver. Sitting and gaining some perspective from which I could view the endless cycle of self-recrimination, almost like a spectator watching characters in a play, I discovered that those circling ruminations arose from a mistaken notion that it was within my power to change the course of events leading to my son’s death. In time, I realized that neither I nor anyone else has the power to alter another person’s behavior. We can only change our own behavior in response to stimuli that come. Trauma blocks our ability to access our grief and must be addressed. Bessel van der Kolk’s The Body Keeps the Score offers tools to aid survivors in that process.

While suicide prevention has recently gotten much deserved attention, postvention—outreach to the bereaved—is an area of concern that has been largely overlooked. We have work to do in this regard. It’s been eighteen years and my intense grief of the early years has abated but time alone was not enough. From the start I knew that I had to slowly and gently move toward the pain of loss rather than run away from it, simply because avoidance was impossible for me. Now, after reading The Body Keeps the Score, I understand why. Only by engaging the internal systems that hold onto trauma can one begin the process of finding peace within.

Review respectfully submitted, Kristen Spexarth