



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

psychic surgery

Surgery is surely the most drastic path to healing. Except in the case of accidents and trauma, surgery is almost always the last choice after less invasive procedures have been tried. Over the years, when I have sat with clients with chronic severe doubts about their worth, their goodness, their beauty, their intelligence, their lovability, I often wished I could reach inside and remove all the negative experiences that led to those fallacious beliefs. I wished I had a magic wand that could erase the traumas of the past, remove them completely and leave room for positive experiences to take root and expand.

While I cannot reach in and remove the experiences nor do I have a magic wand to erase them, in a sense, therapy is a bit like psychic surgery. Medical surgery takes place in an antiseptic environment hopefully free from bacteria and viruses. Therapy takes place in a safe, confidential setting, where outside influences are not permitted. Surgeons and therapists bring extensive academic and experiential training, and varying amounts of practical experience. While occasionally therapists and surgeons make mistakes, hopefully these are acknowledged quickly and any negative consequences are resolved.

OPENING UP

In medical surgery, the body is opened up to reveal the problematic area. In therapy, the person voluntarily opens up and reveals the past: traumas, joys, sorrows, illnesses, accidents, and relationships with parents, peers, lovers, and friends. In short, the client talks about all the experiences that have shaped who they are. The therapist asks questions to learn about the personality traits that also contribute to who the person is: factors like energy and anxiety levels, sleeping, eating, tendency to be optimistic or pessimistic, willingness to take risks, being introverted or extraverted, shy or outgoing, etc.

The client can learn a lot just by telling his or her story. Sometimes just talking can elicit insights and new understandings. Further, being able to be vulnerable and trust another person creates an intimate relationship that can be healing as well.

SEEKING TRUTH

Therapist and client then begin to examine the experiences and to decipher what of the myriad of things the client has been taught or believed are in fact true. A common example is that a client whose parents were critical, neglectful and/or abusive, may have come to believe that they are dumb, ugly, unworthy of love, or sometimes even disgusting.


These are harsh words, but I find that many people reserve their harshest words for themselves. It is as if the person has been looking into a mirror that distorted their image and reality, but they didn't know that the mirror was defective. In examining their experiences, it becomes apparent that the parents had problems of their own which made them incapable of being supportive, kind and loving in a way that would have fostered positive self-esteem, diminished anxiety or buffered depression.

EXCISING NEGATIVE BELIEFS

Unfortunately, however, these old, deep-seated beliefs can be hard to dislodge. Just like a cancerous tumor that has sent tentacles out into the surrounding tissue, these negative beliefs feel true and they often affect all aspects of a person's life—work, marriage, play, even spirituality. Just as a surgeon can have a difficult time removing such a tumor, the client and therapist may have to struggle to dislodge the unhealthy beliefs. After the tumor is removed the surgeon then has to clean up the wound, stitch it closed, perhaps prescribing antibiotics, physical therapy or other procedures to help with the final healing. In the same way, therapist and client have to work to develop new belief systems, new ways of behaving and thinking that are healthier and more effective. Often clients need to learn how to begin taking care of themselves as they would a beloved child—eating right, exercising, getting enough sleep, and perhaps most importantly for many, learning to balance work and play.

FINDING YOUR PATH

I want to close with the words of Martha Beck, who describes the process of healing in a beautiful way in her book *Leaving the Saints*:

"We believe without question almost everything we learn as children, stumble into the many potholes and pitfalls that mar any human endeavor, stagger around blindly in pain and outrage, then slowly remember to pay attention, to listen for the Silence, look for the Light, feel the tenderness that brings both vulnerability to wounds and communion with the force that heals them. Don't worry about losing your way. . . . If you do, pain will remind you to find your path again. Joy will let you know when you are back on it." 

Karen Stewart retired in October 2021 after more than 40 years of practicing psychology.

She cares deeply about this planet and all of the people on it, especially the marginalized, social excluded and disenfranchised. She believes we are all one and we sink or swim together. She still has something to say.

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