

Interview with Dr. Suzanne B. Phillips and Dr. Raffaele Felaco
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Healing Together: A Couple’s Guide to Coping with Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress
by Suzanne B. Phillips Psy.D., ABPP & Dianne Kane, DSW (New Harbinger
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www.couplesaftertrauma.com

Blog site <http://blogs.psychcentral.com/healing-together/>

Suzanne B. Phillips Psy.D., ABPP, CGP is a licensed psychologist, psychoanalyst and Diplomat in Group Psychology. She is Adjunct Professor of Clinical Psychology in the Doctoral Program of Long Island University and on the faculty of the Post-Doctoral Programs of the Derner Institute of Adelphi University. As a psychologist she has worked with couples for over 25 years and in the aftermath of trauma has provided direct service to civilians and uniformed responders, trained other professionals, published on bereavement, trauma, uniformed services and couples.

How can the trauma affect the uninjured member of the couple? How can this affect the life of couple?

On September 11, 2001 the United State sustained a terrorist attack that destroyed the Twin Towers in lower Manhattan and most of the surrounding area. It resulted in the deaths of 2,973 people which included 343 fire-fighters and paramedics who entered the buildings to save others. In response, thousands of surviving firefighters mourning the loss of their firefighter brothers and family members, worked their regular jobs, attended memorials and searched on “the pile” for bodies until it was closed in June 2002. The impact of this mission and their grief and loss was traumatic to them and devastating to their marriages.

What we found working with hundreds of these couples as well as other couples in the aftermath of disaster and traumatic events, is that whether a traumatic event occurs to one or both partners – both feel the impact and their relationship becomes shaken. Traumatic events are unexpected, unimaginable and overwhelming. They affect relationships because they rob partners of their sense of safety and trust. They alter what was familiar. When a partner is hurt, grieving, having nightmares, too angry to speak or too sad to hope **both** partners struggle and suffer. Sometimes they feel like strangers to each other. For a time they seem unable to find the bond that they once shared.

How, in fact, can the theory you present help couples to change?

We believe that although a couple’s relationship will often suffer the greatest blow in the aftermath of trauma – it can also be the greatest source of support, resilience and recovery. What we found is that that when couples understand the nature of trauma and its impact on them; when they are able to make meaning of the symptoms that they are experiencing, when they learn new strategies for coping with change and grief, when they remind each other of their strengths and resiliency as a couple, they are better able to heal as individuals and as a couple. The goal of the book *Healing Together: A Couple’s Guide to Coping with Trauma and Post-traumatic Stress* is to help couples do this.

When one or both partners in a relationship experience a traumatic event, this can really put the relationship in crisis. In your experience what are some of the best the strategies for the trauma recovery?

Some of the important strategies that we offer in the book include:

Understanding the Common Reactions To Trauma- If a partner knows, for instance, that **Re-experiencing** (flashbacks, nightmares, traumatic memories), **Hyperarousal** (irritability, inability to relax, concentrate, sleep etc.) and **Numbing and Avoidance** (inability to feel, discomfort with crowds etc.) are common reactions after trauma that usually subside with time, they are less likely to overreact, criticise or misinterpret them as rejection.

Couple Anger Management- There is a complex connection between trauma, loss, depression and anger. When couples recognize that trauma impacts them psychologically and physically, they may understand the irritability, over-reactivity and blame associated with trauma. Working on communicating, identifying triggers of anger that mask pain and frustration can be very useful.

Reclaiming Intimacy- It is important for couples to understand how and why trauma disrupts intimacy and connection and that they are not alone in feeling detached and unconnected. Because trauma freezes people into the traumatic moment, they often can't remember their pre-trauma selves. In one exercise we ask each partner to reach behind the trauma to identify " A Couple Safe Place" – a place that they remember feeling happy and at peace with their partner – it could be a vacation, a car, an apartment , the very thought of which brings them a positive feeling about their partner. We ask them to share it .We remind them that it belongs to them. We ask them to use the memory of that place to bring their thoughts and feelings back to their positive couple self.

What can the uninjured partner do to stay close to her/his hurt partner?

The most endorsed intervention nationally and internationally in the early stages of trauma is Psychological First Aid. We suggest that something a partner might do to help the injured or upset partner is Couple Psychological First Aid. An important aspect of Couple Psychological First Aid involves being a **compassionate presence** to the partner. We know from attachment studies that because of the physical and psychological bond couples share, their presence or even their voice on a phone is more calming than that of anyone else. We suggest to couples that " just being there" "just listening" " bringing two cups of coffee" or " putting on the music and holding hands", for example, is very powerful. It is not a solution, an answer, a lecture – it just says "**I'm here because you are mine and whatever you feel is ok!**"

Our Goal in this book and in our work with couples after trauma is to help couples take the journey they never expected to take – from trauma to recovery.

Thank you, Suzanne B. Phillips Psy.D.,ABPP,CGP,FAGPA

