



Trauma is Really Strange

Written by Steve Haines

Reviewed by Kamalamani



You know how the look and feel of some books is particularly pleasing? Well this is one of those books. It's a beautifully produced 16-page pamphlet rather than a book; its comic-filled pages lovingly produced in calming hues of blue-green, brown, orange and russet red. The goal of this book is to be "a non-scary introduction to trauma for many people"; it goes way beyond achieving its goals in explaining what happens to the brain during trauma and how we can heal trauma.

As a practising body psychotherapist I was happy to discover this book, given that I can find reading and researching trauma—intellectually and personally in doing my own work—both illuminating and sobering. Not simply because of the challenge of the subject area, but given that trauma books are very often fairly hefty tomes. From this point of view, this book breaks new ground in terms of being an accessible, easy read, yet still getting to the heart of what is useful to know about the 'strangeness' of trauma. It's a book I know I'll lend to clients who want to understand how trauma works, particularly with Haines' approach "healing trauma is about meeting the body", which coincides with my own way of working.

Haines begins by exploring dissociation, starting with the example of the Victorian explorer David Livingstone and his description of dissociation: "It caused a sort of dreaminess in which there was no sense of panic or feeling of terror." He explains what's happening to the brain in traumatic situations, giving examples of statements from his clinical practice, which is useful in highlighting the symptoms of trauma. Most importantly for me he points out—or, at least, the cartoon characters—how dissociation can be difficult to identify as "we don't know what we don't know."

Early on Haines introduces three statements to help our understanding of and ability to work with trauma: 1. There is trauma; 2. We can overcome trauma; and 3. Healing trauma is about meeting the body. In unpacking each of these statements, Haines demystifies trauma, simply defining it as "anything that overwhelms our ability to cope." Personally I'm glad to see that he includes birth trauma, which sometimes gets overlooked in trauma explorations. He explains the continuum between everyday stress, PTSD, and developmental trauma, taking the pathology out of trauma, and pointing out the shift towards models of 'post-traumatic growth' and the potential for healing.

In explaining his third statement, 'healing trauma is about meeting the body', Haines usefully points out, for the newcomer to trauma, how the brain is still acting to protect us as if the trauma is happening right now. He goes on to say that we do not need to understand and we do not need to remember and how "this is a radical and strange concept." This was the only contentious point of the book for me. Whilst I entirely agree with Haines in encouraging others not to try too hard to think or rationalize their way out of trauma, I also regularly encounter clients who *want* to understand, who have fleeting, dislocated memories, with their main way of processing being through thinking! They have ended up on my doorstep because they

realize they can't do the work of meeting their bodies and learning to self-regulate alone and need the embodied and relational support which therapy can, hopefully, offer. So for me there were some slight over-simplifications in this part of the book.

Haines goes on to do a brilliant job of looking at how the brain and autonomic nervous system—including the new and old vagus—work, clarifying the different functions of different areas of the brain. The final pages of the book are taken up with suggestions for learning to self-regulate our bodies as we overcome trauma, and with helpful introductory ideas about how to ground and notice our senses. He then introduces his 'O-M-G' model: orient, move, and ground, with invaluable suggestions, jargon-free language and a tone that neither discounts the effects of trauma, nor pathologizes, which I found refreshing.

The learning and wisdom Haines must have acquired as a body worker during the past 18 years is very much embodied in this comic book. It is informative, accessible, in parts humorous, yet it does not shy away from telling it how it is with the strangeness of trauma. Understanding the science of pain and trauma has, in his words, transformed his approach to healing, strengthened, I'm sure by his studying of Yoga, Shiatsu, Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy, Trauma Releasing Exercises (TRE) and being a chiropractor in London and Geneva. Credit should also go to Sophie Standing who provided the fabulous illustrations that bring the content to life. Standing is a London-based illustrator, animator, and designer who is, in her own words from her website: "Inspired by people and the way they function. I am fascinated by the way that our bodies and brains work." Standing also provided the illustrations for Haines 2016 book "Pain is Really Strange", also published by Singing Dragon, an imprint of Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

I have no doubt, reading this book, that it could be lifesaver for readers trying to make sense of themselves and their symptoms, with little knowledge of physiology and body psychotherapy. It's the best introduction to trauma I have encountered, and I imagine it will become a useful resource for body workers and therapists looking to understand the physiological aspects of trauma. I found the small print footnotes on most pages a helpful addition and useful to those who aren't necessarily completely new to trauma in reading around the subject area more. I personally found this comic book an invaluable reminder as to how 'trauma is really strange', suggested ways to heal trauma, and I enjoyed Haines gentle yet authoritative tone.

Kamalanani's bio is on page 70.