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Maybe the Body Keeps the Score, But My Life is Not a Game

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This chapter is dedicated to the late Fred Newman, my friend, mentor, co-founder of the East Side Institute, and creator of social therapy.

> "How do we meet suffering? How do we respond to it? And maybe our stuckness is revealed by the over-generalization of trauma, of the trauma concept today. Everything is trauma. Everything is potentially triggering. You look at someone the wrong way, you've potentially traumatized that person. But not in the land that I come from anyway! I find that this is increasingly true when I'm in the West, when I'm in Europe or when I'm in the United States. It's like, we've become (and by we I'm talking about bodies gestating in Western arrangements), we become so brittle, so brittle that it seems anything that inhabits or touches our inseparability is immediately called out, is immediately poisoned or pathologized."

So says Bayo Akomolafe, the world-renowned post-activist public philosopher. He spoke these words in a conversation he and I had in 2022. This conversation and a follow-up one were published online with the title "A Meandering Search for Method: Becoming Human in a Post-human World," and can be found at Bayo's site (https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/) and mine

(https://loisholzman.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/A-Meandering-Search-for-Method-5-11.pdf).

I echoed and expanded on Akomolafe:

> "So many people insist that they have been very helped by understanding that they've been traumatized, whether that's as an individual or collective. So, I try to speak in a way that accepts their experience, of course, and then I give expression to my understanding that we lose so much when we accept the cultural capital of being traumatized, that we lose ourselves. I think we lose ourselves in the buzzwords, and we lose our ordinary language. We just lose the way people talk, whatever language they speak in.
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> In our International Class, which has people from all over the world, we recently had a conversation that turned to the issue of trauma. There were three Nigerians in that class, two young activist women, and an older woman. In response to a woman from the US speaking of her trauma, her *personal trauma,* one of the Nigerian women said, "I don't know what you're talking about. In Nigeria, trauma has to be something like worse than death. It's not a word that anybody would use to describe almost getting hit by a car, or whatever."
>
> So that was really, really interesting and it seemed to me like: what's the *ordinary language* in Nigeria for experiences that now people in the US and elsewhere are speaking of as *trauma*? I think we lose that. I think we lose the invitation to our imaginations to create other ways of speaking and relating around painful things that might have happened to us.

> And then finally, we lose our wholeness. So, ironically in "trauma," which transferred from referring to physical trauma of the body to emotional or psychological trauma, one would think that this migration of meaning kind of brought the mind and body together. But, instead, I think we *lose our wholeness,* and obviously we lose our political, social and cultural world.
>
> Those are some of the losses. I haven't found a way to unpack all of that, but there's this terrible loss, I think, to people's capacity to create their lives."

I begin this chapter with these critical comments on trauma and trauma language to locate myself as a contributor to this volume, *Pioneers in Trauma Therapy Research and Practice: Integrating Trauma Transformative Care into Clinical Practice.* As a developer, along with the late Fred Newman, of social therapeutics and its practical-critical rejection of mainstream psychology's conceptions, priorities, and practices (including individualism, identity, diagnosis, and victimization), I bristle at the term trauma therapy. As the above quotes make clear, I believe there is a tyranny in psychology's naming of life experiences and developing "treatment" based on this naming. Social therapeutics works with people who have experienced horrific abuse, violence, fear and loss—what Western psychology now identifies as trauma—without labeling or identifying them as traumatized. That is the subject of this chapter.

Social Therapeutics, in Brief

Social therapeutics originated in social therapy, a non-diagnostic, group-oriented psychotherapy developed in the 1970s by the late philosopher and political activist Fred Newman. Newman and I established the East Side Institute through which, into the early 2000's (when licensing requirements went into effect), both lay people and professionals were trained as social therapists and subsequently opened centers throughout New York City and elsewhere in the US.

Originating along with other radical and alternative therapies as a challenge to psychology and psychiatry's growing adherence to a medical model, its refusal to see its own social, political and cultural biases, its location of emotional distress in the individual psyche (to name a few of its most glaring flaws), over the past 50 years social therapy expanded far beyond the therapy office. The now broader approach is known as *social therapeutics*. As part of a growing movement of cultural-historical, activity-theoretic, social constructionist, narrative, and other practical critiques of scientific psychology, social therapeutics has become a powerful "push-back" to American psychology and its growing global hegemony. Social therapy, the clinical practice, continues to be studied and practiced by professional therapists, counselors and social workers worldwide, many of whom have thriving practices

Social therapeutics spread, and continues to do so, through the programs of the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy ("the Institute"), which Newman and I founded in the 1980s,. In addition to those who were inspired to start their own practices, many others infuse their existing practices with our methodology. Today, social therapeutics is practiced globally in the arenas of psychology, social work, coaching, education, health care, wellness, aging, youth development, community

organizing, organizational development, and the performing and creative arts. It continues to evolve through the creative work of inventive practitioners and social change agents as a powerful method for personal and community transformation. A glimpse of its depth and breadth can be seen through our Associates, graduates https://eastsideinstitute.org/study/international-class/international-class-photos-and-bios/, initiatives, and alliances (at eastsideinstitute.org through drop down menus). This chapter will introduce some of these people and projects.

Rather than leave critique of psychology (and much else) to academic experts and other students of social institutions, social therapeutics involves ordinary people, whether they come to therapy or not, in the critique. This critique is not from a distance, nor is it theoretical. It is practical-critical, that is, the critique is in the practice, in the activity of doing therapy or whatever it is the people involved are doing. It represents a move from critical (opposition, resistance, destruction or deconstruction) to practical-critical (creating something new out of what exists, resistance-in-creating other, deconstruction-in-reconstruction). It represents a move from applying method to practicing method, from using method as an instrumental tool meant to yield results to method as dialectically united with results (Newman and Holzman, 2006). The tool-and-result method of social therapeutic activity is philosophical, playful, performatory, and collective. It involves groupings of people of all different sizes in creating their ensemble/building their group/making something new out of what exists.

Dozens of concepts from psychology have become so common in ordinary language that no one questions their existence (much less their histories). The words identity, addiction and mental illness are part of the lexicon of people the world over and,

with few exceptions, are assumed to refer to real things. Trauma is fast joining them. These popular and entrenched beliefs about what is real are difficult to unlodge. But we can move about and around them by performing as philosophers and playing with them.

Drawing attention to the psychological language that shapes how we think and feel, as a culture and as individual people, is a centerpiece of my recent book, *A Developmentalist's Guide to Better Mental Health: Navigating Everyday Life Dilemmas* (Holzman, 2025). The heart of the book is fifty letters I (as "the Developmentalist") received from readers asking for help with issues in their lives—and my responses to them. The following example of a letter and my response deals directly with trauma and trauma talk.

I'VE BEEN TRAUMATIZED ... BUT THEN, WHO HASN'T?!

Dear Developmentalist,

I've been thinking about trauma, grief and healing, especially after the latest mass shootings in the US. I believe that trauma is an ordinary part of human life–it's everywhere—beginning with the trauma of birth.

I am also intrigued by the etymology of the word trauma: "physical wound"; a Latin medical term, from the Greek trauma "a wound, a hurt; a defeat." And I also see how we live in a culture that has become obsessed with trauma.

I had traumatic experiences as a child, having been exposed to sexual matters at way too young an age. My parents were neglectful, and then there were

the ordinary kinds of abuse most women experience, some more traumatic than others. I have been doing therapeutic work to "heal these wounds."

On the same day as my partner tested positive for Covid, I found out that a friend I've known all my life committed suicide. Four days later, I came down with a wicked case of Covid. I spent 24 hours sobbing off-and-on, feeling sick and filled with anger and grief: I was in pain! I had an intense and horrible dream about my rage towards my mother. I obsessed over negative thoughts until I felt despair. I was enraged at myself for getting sick and at the world for being so violent and unjust. Clearly, I was dealing with the grief of losing a dear friend to suicide. I was spinning out of control emotionally, as if I had become the little girl who couldn't be loved, cared for and comforted. Even with vaccines, my Covid seemed worse than everyone else's. It was as if the virus were moving some of the emotional trauma out of my body. Was I working out something that needed to get resolved? I want to say it has been a bit…traumatic!

I read your posts about language games, and I'm intrigued by the trauma/healing/grief language game. Is it developmental to use the same language to talk about healing from physical wounds and sickness as it is to heal from emotional wounds? Is there a developmental way to understand trauma?

Sincerely,

Confused and Traumatized

Dear Confused and Traumatized,

I am so sorry that you've been having such a hard time with so much going one that's both physically and emotionally painful. It sounds truly awful. It also sounds like you've gone through this painful period and are now reflecting on how we speak about and understand such experiences. I'm glad you're "intrigued by the trauma/healing/grief language game"— exploring it can be a very emotionally developmental activity!

You mention that our culture has become obsessed with trauma, and I agree. Lots of people agree, and some are talking about it, like the writer at Vox. for whom it's become the "word of the decade" or the NYTimes op-ed writer, who wonders, "If everything is trauma, is anything?" I, too, wonder.

When a culture becomes obsessed in this way, that is, by the expansion of particular words and concepts—which have been created in particular and relatively narrow contexts—into an ever-widening swath of everyday experiences, we lose so much. We lose ourselves in the swarm of buzz words. We lose what was our ordinary language. We lose our imagination to create our own new expressions. We lose our wholeness. We lose the political, social and cultural world.

But so many people are helped by the language of trauma that I would be remiss if I just left you with all this loss! People say that trauma gives them a new understanding of themselves, clarity, closure, healing, and much more. I certainly acknowledge that, and I'm very glad for their relief.

The losses, it seems to me, stem from how today's trauma has come to frame human experience. Trauma is used so broadly and widely—sometimes as

an event, sometimes as its aftermath, sometimes as an explanation—that it can feel at times that trauma is all there is and all that we are. In a park near my house there is a stone wall with these words from Gertrude Stein etched in it: "I am, because my little dog loves me." Taking great, non-poetic, license with Gertrude, our culture increasingly pressures us to say, "I am, because I've been traumatized."

Can we be in pain without having been traumatized? Can we suffer without trauma? I have been known to ponder such questions. You seem ready, Confused and Traumatized, to join me. I hope so.

Another thing about today's trauma is that it's seen as living inside an individual person, physically and psychologically, which makes a lot of human atrocity hard to see and deal with socially, culturally and politically. Murder is an act of violence. Rape is an act of violence. Are they more or less so by virtue of being identified as traumatic? The poverty of the world is indefensible cruelty, whether or not anyone—or everyone—is traumatized by it. I don't want the horrific things human beings do to one another to take a back seat to trauma. They are horrific enough.

As to your questions, here's my thinking. "Is it developmental to use the same language to talk about healing from physical wounds as it is to heal from emotional wounds?" Developmental or not, people do it—a lot! The developmental question is: What is that way of speaking doing with, to and for us? You then ask, "Is there a developmental way to understand trauma?" If it's done exploratorily, like the conversation you and I are having here, then I think it

> just might be. (By the way, I think you would have answered the same way I just did.)
>
> Developmentally yours,
>
> Lois
>
> (Holzman, 2025, pp. 25-27)

Binaries

A common way that people get stuck socially, emotionally, intellectually morally, and politically is by being *trapped in binaries*. Seeing "bipolarly"—either-or, this or that—is how we have been socialized to see, think, feel, and choose. Getting free from such a limitation involves engaging binaries in such a way that discovery of something other than them is possible. Social therapeutic practitioners do this in dozens, even hundreds, of ways that they have created.

The following illustration, from a workshop setting, is an especially direct way. Briefly present to the group you are with the notion, with examples, that we by and large go through our days seeing and dealing with binaries. Invite them to write down as many as they can think of. Within five minutes the list will be over 50! People will have intense and sobering responses at the realization of how pervasive "either-or" is and of how controlling this way of seeing, understanding and relating are. From the discussion, invite people, in smaller groups, to play with the list they generated, to create something with it, and then share it with the larger group.

Drawing attention to the either-or traps we find ourselves in and offering ways out is another recurring theme of *A Developmentalist's Guide…* (Holzman, 2025). Here is a

letter-response illustration.

MY VOICE IS NOT WELCOME – RIGHT OR LEFT

Dear Lois,

I live in a bedroom community that is polarized politically. And while the demographics are shifting, people who hold extreme views, either conservative or liberal (with which I am aligned politically) are vocal and local elections have been ugly.

There is an *us-vs.-them* feel to it all, and at the heart of most of the issues —if you can look past the rhetoric and inflammatory statements —is *identity*. Unfortunately, everything about how we school our kids is filled with hot button issues and leave students caught in the middle.

There are threats and trash talking from both sides as we grapple with community issues. As someone who cares deeply about my community and wants to make a difference, I am struggling to figure out how to do that. My engagement with the liberal-leaning political group has left me feeling overwhelmed by a competition around proving how liberal we are. There's a hefty dose of sanctimony and an unwillingness to see grey areas or cultivate empathy.

My personal connections to people on the conservative side have left me feeling vulnerable. I am a single, self-employed parent with a business in town and have been reluctant to take a public stand after receiving some threatening messages, especially since I do not agree with a perpetuation of closed mindedness.

My heart hurts because I see people on both "sides" who could make change if they would only work together. But they seem unwilling to engage in dialogue, or to appreciate the complexities of a situation, or to accept that they might be wrong. I have limited resources of time and money; I am concerned about angering those who have been willing to point fingers and make threats—and I still want to help start a dialogue. I have no idea how. Do you have any ideas?

Signed,

Stuck Left-of-Middle

Dear Stuck,

I so appreciate your heartfelt letter that speaks to something causing great pain for so many of us who live in the United States (and, sadly, many other nation states). My guess is that most people want to do something about it, as you do, and they are as stuck as you are. Alongside the anger and disappointment toward fellow citizens for their inflammatory ways of speaking and unwillingness to give up their knowing stance, frustration at an overall cultural environment in which you must have one of two political identities, there is the real fear of retaliation, being ostracized or worse. It's hard to be creative, see new possibilities, and take risks in such a mass emotional state!

Still and all, you believe that we can do better, that people on both sides in your community can come together to make change. I so agree with you!

The question, of course, is how. While I have no answer—*you all will have to create it*—I do have some direction for changing how you see yourself and your role in this very bad play your community is creating. It is a direction that might activate you and others to try some new ways of relating.

You're probably right that at the heart of most of the contentious issues is identity. You must be left or right. You must be conservative or liberal when it comes to children and schooling. And so on.

What I wonder about, though, is *your* identity. I wonder if you think you're not playing that game in wanting to bring people together. I love that intention, but not the position you have placed yourself in—the identity you've assumed—i.e., *being in the middle*. Aren't you unknowingly accepting the either-or, this-or-that framework by creating another identity within it? And might this "place" be a source of stuckness?

Let's imagine another "place" you might be. Perhaps it's another identity, or another kind of identity. I don't think you're in the middle. I think you are *left out.* Your desire for people to change the toxic discourse, to create dialogue, to work together to make change in the community —all this is left out of how things are now. You, and others like you, are left out.

How you might go forward is to be proud of being left out rather than being victimized by being in the middle and to take action grounded in this pride.

It will not be easy! But you have two things going for you. One is the history of your community. In the past and even now, I am sure there is much that's been accomplished without toxicity. What things do people have in

common? (loving nature? playing outdoors? local rituals and celebrations?) What do they agree on? What are they proud of accomplishing together? Find ways to draw on those things, tell stories about them, build with them, play with them. Maybe you can invite people to make meals/picnics/ bake sales together, to sing or read or write poetry together—these fun and politically neutral activities, even if just a couple of people participate, can start the ball rolling. They will have created something new together. Maybe they'll do it again.

The second thing you have going for you is the many projects and associations that are working for the same goal. You can draw confidence, inspiration, and practical ideas from them. I've made a list of resources for you to check out. While they are less creative and playful than I would like, they are all trying something new.

Living Room Conversations

Moral Courage

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation

Uncomfortable Independent Conversations

Organizations Transforming Polarization and Division

In a nutshell, my advice to you is—Don't let your community keep you out!

Developmentally yours,

Lois

Holzman, L 2025, pp.

A Me-Centered Universe

Another example is how *solipsism keeps us locked into ourselves*, perhaps especially, into our pain. Social therapeutics engages people in philosophically exploring notions of self. It is common is social therapy groups and other social therapeutic settings for invitations to explore core assumptions to emerge from the very concrete issues people are raising, whether that be finding it very hard to ask for and accept help, to insisting that one's sense of self is actually who you are. Rather than being imposed from a distance, remarks such as "Do you have to have a self to be the unique you that you are?"; and "Can you be other than who you are?" are invitations that might emerge in a therapeutic conversation in which fixed identity is taken for granted. In workshop settings, practitioners find that improvisation is an effective tool for discovering assumptions about our *selves*. One way to play with self and other, for example, involves inviting people, in pairs, to introduce themselves to their partner and then perform as their partner introducing themselves to the group. The performed introduction is both you and not you! Ponder that!

The Ubiquitous "Because"

The binary self-other and the solipsism of self (the "me"-centered universe) are a dangerous combination. When we add the *demand for causality* (as Western and most other cultures do), we have a lethal mixture that fuels emotional distress, loneliness, hopelessness and rage. While it has been a great conceptual discovery with vast implications for science, medicine, engineering and technology, cause-effect understanding applied to the human realm has been a mistake (Newman and Holzman, 1996). For, it is seriously misguided to insist that all human thought and action is best

understood in terms of cause and effect. We are socialized to see, for example, current emotions in terms of past events—to assume that some event in your past causes you to feel and react to something today, to assume that everything anyone does has a cause ("I got angry because he hurt me," "She walked right by me because I disappointed her"), and to be paralyzed and do nothing because you're afraid of the effect it might have. The obsession with cause in everyday life keeps people stuck.

Here is a letter-response engaging causality's "stuckness."

EVERYONE ANNOYS ME!

Dear Developmentalist:

I'm writing to ask for help to develop around Getting Annoyed!

I am easily, intensely and very often annoyed by the actions, words or seeming inabilities of others—and really often it's by people I most care for! I am noticing increasing annoyance and want to do something else. I hope you can help!

I can't believe how annoyed I get—all the time! I must think I know it all better! It's not giving or friendly. I'm unhappy, bored and burdened with getting annoyed by my friends and loved ones, not to mention people I work with. I mean, I MUST annoy them, too. I've got to think that I'm pushing people away.

Telling myself not to get annoyed isn't working at all, by the way. Looking forward to your thoughts, and your development guidance!

Regards,

Emilie in New Jersey

Dear Emilie,

What is it to be annoyed? Let's investigate!

I love your invitation because it's not only you who gets annoyed. We all do. And my guess is that 99% of us wish we did it a lot less. I think it might help us get there—or at least closer—if we had a sense of what we're doing when we "get annoyed."

Like most people, you probably think that your annoyance is caused by the actions of others, that what they do or don't do, or how they do it or don't do it, causes you to "get annoyed." I'll challenge that causal connection in a little bit, but for now, let's unpack what "getting annoyed" feels like for you.

When they annoy you, do your friends and loved ones irritate you? Upset you? Disappoint you? Frustrate you? Shock you? Anger you? Do you feel sad? Afraid? Stuck? I wonder about that and invite you to join me. Because our emotionality is very complex and messy and smushed together—we rarely (if ever) are feeling only one thing at a time. I invite you to explore the messiness of your emotionality, especially when you "get annoyed." You might surprise yourself and discover that "annoyance" is the least of it!

My invitation to ponder these questions in relation to how you are living your life, emotionally-socially speaking, comes from how you opened your letter, when you wrote: "I am easily, intensely and very often annoyed by the actions, words or seeming inabilities of others and really often by people I most care for." It's the "by" in that sentence that's troublesome, not abstractly, but in living our

> lives. For, there must be a cause of the annoyance, right? There I am, happily cooking dinner, engrossed in a good book, walking to work, having a glass of wine with friends, and such and such happens, and suddenly I am so annoyed! Something must have caused it, and it feels like the cause of my annoyance is what just happened, what so-and-so did or didn't say or do. This seems natural, given that we're told so often that we can be "triggered," and that someone "made me feel or do something" that seeing it that way feels "right" to us.
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> But what if it's that connection, that causal relation, that feeling that it must be the case, that makes it so hard for you to "do something else"? What if "getting annoyed" is not an inner state that you either "let out" or try to stifle? You say that isn't working, and I'm not surprised.
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> Such a complex human activity as annoyance (both getting annoyed and being annoying) deserves a lot more work. Like investigating. And playing with. And trying out new performances of. And creating meaning with. Most importantly, all this is best done with the people who annoy you!
>
> Let me know how it goes!
>
> Developmentally Yours,
>
> Lois
>
> Holzman, L. 2025, pp.)

Central to the social therapeutic method is the capacity people have to create environments that—through that very activity—create all kinds of things all kinds of things: new ways of speaking and listening, new ways of learning and teaching, new

ways of working and playing together, new kinds of relationships, new understandings of who they are and might become, and new emotions. The "work" of a group is to create such an environment for continuous becoming. Not surprisingly, then the issue of the relationship between individual and group is another topic that comes up for philosophical exploration—"Is a group a bunch of individuals or it is something else?" "Can your pain become our pain? Can we make something developmental with it?" Inviting a group to make something with pain is key to social therapeutic work with "trauma."

Making Something with Pain

I posed that last sentence to socially-therapeutically trained therapists and coaches and invited them to respond with illustrations from their practices. What follows are excerpts from these conversations.

Developing Across Borders

LC is an intercultural youth worker, originally from Eastern Europe and now residing in Western Europe, and a trained social therapeutic coach with the Institute's Developing Across Borders (DAB) program. Open to anyone anywhere, DAB groups are virtual and meet weekly for 90 minutes. In these groups, participants encounter people from different cultures languages, economic backgrounds and of different generations. Some are grappling with natural disaster, civil war, or an authoritarian political environment, others are grassroots activists involved in community-based theater, peer support groups, youth

development or refugee projects in their communities, and still others are facing a personal crisis. Participants learn to see and build with others "not like me!" Bringing their varied histories, life circumstances and cultural differences, they create conversation through which they are becoming citizens of the world.

LC describes in general terms how her groups work/play with trauma and trauma talk. As you will see, there is no technique here, and the approach is nuanced and complex.

> We work with everything that people bring to group: their reliance on diagnoses and on pop psychology terms from Tik Tok. We build with all the buzz words: Trauma, Trauma Response, Freezing, Attachment styles, and more. Some of the terms I have an understanding of; some I have judgements about — and some escape me as I haven't been trained as a classical therapist. I've been working to not be overdetermined by these terms.
>
> A presumption about trauma is that it's very big — or dramatic. And sometimes when people come with their "trauma," I'm inclined to say, "Yeah, and…? So, what do we do with that?"
>
> We also can make presumptions about impact and pain. We tend to classify and sensationalize trauma: we imagine it to be of a certain magnitude of drama— violence, exile —yet everyday events can have a huge impact. The group tends to make these evaluations about what constitutes REAL trauma.

> A group member saying "someone ended our friendship and my whole value system was turned upside down," may not be regarded as being "traumatized."
>
> When I was 19 bombs were falling in Serbia. Is that the most significant trauma of my life? Or does something feel more traumatic (like a friendship ending?) Perhaps. How do we measure the impact of events in our lives? How do we gauge pain?
>
> You can't do therapy that will obliterate the "trauma." Trauma can be transformed, but it can't be deleted.
>
> People get over-determined by it. And the language of trauma becomes identity building. In the world where people aren't given credit for their pain. They have a label—so they now want to grab it. (LC, 2025, personal communication)

In this next excerpt from our conversations with LC, she paints a vivid picture of one of her groups and the hard time it has working and playing with one of its members and her trauma story.

> LC: One client (in her late 60s) often talks about being hospitalized as a teenager in a psychiatric institution and undergoing forced treatments and psychiatric violence. She refers to this as a major trauma that changed her forever. Whenever relationships in her life now become too much, she reverts to the explanation of that early trauma as the rationale for why she can't cope now ("it's too painful!").

When she first talked about it in group, people wanted to explore the details and commiserated with her on the horror of the situation. Then at some point (maybe after several times of her telling the story) the group asked, “So now what? Where is the line between this being your hiding place and something that happened to you that is still painful?”

She remains unable to deconstruct how her understanding of trauma helped to produce her victimization. We are still there – playing in the sand with her – still dancing. We’re able more and more to make it more ordinary. We went through the motions of holding the pain with her enough times that we can now say: "I’m really so sorry. We are with you in your pain, but it’s blocking us. Can we feel the pain and go further?” We raise the developmental question.

To hear about the pain she went through in gruesome detail is very seductive. And yet there’s a limit. We did the empathy. We did the seduction. At some point we asked, "How can you keep building your life *while you’re feeling this pain*? How can you hold life’s unfairness — life’s injustice? Humans can be fair; this world is not fair. Can we grow while we’re screaming in pain? Can we do something new? How can you feel joy when you think your life was taken away from you at 15?"

The group’s work with her has been a dance. We make some steps forward, then back and to the side. It’s certainly not a linear process. One week the group is super empathic – all or most everyone will get seduced by the pain. They stop asking developmental questions. And attempts at soothing her end

up with the group falling down the rabbit hole. She comes in, saying, “I want to work on being more optimistic." The group asks what she means. We get to work. Then she quickly starts getting organized by her identification with the trauma and sharing of gruesome details. And there we go: "Tell us more...That’s terrible.” And then off we go as the group chases the gruesomeness and her victimization. And then she might say after a long monologue, “Maybe the group can’t help me. You can’t reach me."

The group had to recognize what was happening — what we were doing. They had to name the activity of being seduced. The group had to learn to be deliberate, to choose what we wanted to do, how we wanted to respond. In that process, the group is developing. "You came in asking for help, wanting to grow. As we proceeded, you retreated and went back to naming all the things that life did you wrong. Can we stay on what you asked for help with?"

This is a very new group. Two new members recently came in, and soon we were chasing the trauma again. It’s a HUMAN RESPONSE to respond to a human in pain. We want to persuade. Perk them up.

The group gets angry at the stuckness of someone in trauma We want to help but can’t. This comes from loving and feeling helpless. “If you mention the psychiatric hospital one more time, I’m going to scream. I can’t stand to look at the stuck pain you’re in right now because of being immersed in pain.”

When we’re doing well, we’re *HOLDING IT ALL* – the pain and the demand.

> The group is growing and individuals are growing. We have members from the US, Nicaragua, Uganda and India. I am Serbian and my co-leader is American. People are living very different lives. The man in Uganda lives with a lack of electricity and malaria. He does not talk about the everyday hardships in terms of trauma. The American woman is leading a relatively privileged life, including not finding a dog-sitter, and she lives and relives trauma! There are so many other differences in privilege and the invocation of "trauma."
>
> The group has grown so that, for example, the Indian woman can have a **CULTURALLY UNIMAGINABLE** response to this work. Instead of politely listening to "an elder" (which is expected in her culture), she can do some new things with the group. And those changes in her performance in the group ripples out in ways she relates others in India.
>
> They bring some of the new performance in group into their own (conservative) cultures. Ripples out in ways that are unimaginable. (LC, 2025, personal communication)

Another Developing Across Borders coach responded to my statement," Inviting a group to make something with pain is key to social therapeutic work with 'trauma'" by sharing work one of her groups is doing related to a group member who is a recent political exile.

> RR is a longtime member of a *Developing Across Borders* social therapeutic group. He had lived in Nicaragua all his life, and as a younger, politically active

and progressive man, supported the Sandinistas after they first came to power in 1979. When they regained power in 2007, the government became increasingly authoritarian and intolerant, creating an opposition movement, which RR joined. As conditions worsened during the covid lockdowns, opposition leaders became targets of brutal reprisals. Many were rounded up, jailed and/or forced into exile.

RR came to his Developing Across Borders group and reported that he himself had become a target of government surveillance. With little emotion, he flatly told his group that at any moment, he could be arrested, detained and sent to prison. He would need to go into hiding. A knock on the door could be the police coming to take him to prison. The group witnessed several surprise visits that were false alarms, but terrifying.

RR's group, which included participants from Latin America, Europe and the US, shared their upset and fear for what he was going through. They couldn't imagine that he wasn't frightened too and asked him to give the group his emotions. RR told them that he couldn't/wouldn't. He needed to be laser focused on his escape and it was too perilous, too off-centering, to allow himself to be emotional.

The group grappled with whether and how they could find new ways to be intimate with RR. What could they do with their own fear and panic? What else could they do with RR if they weren't pressuring him to be emotional (which is what they had assumed would be helpful.) RR insisted that he had to be vigilant.

He needed to be there doing whatever the group was doing. That was what he could handle.

Slowly, the group found new ways to be with RR and give their support. They asked about the minutia about his preparations for escape: "Tell us about your day. What supplies did you get? Have you packed your travel bags? What's in your backpack? Did you remember your medicine? Do you have a warm coat? Are you eating enough?" They asked about his bodily sensations: "Where's the ache? Describe the grip in your stomach." And the group shared their own sensations of anxiety and stress. They worked to make the group a place of hospice and loving concern—often they played music, and brought and recited poems.

Eventually RR was able to leave Nicaragua, making a first stop in Central America and then onward to Spain. But then, another tragedy. He heard through a comrade that his brother had been murdered in the streets. A police squad had shot him (likely a case of mistaken identity) and left him to die. His parents happened to walk by and see a young man's body in the street—not recognizing it as their son until they recognized the logo on his shirt. The family was devastated.

Throughout his forced exile from Nicaragua and resettlement in Spain, the group and RR performed a "distributed" emotionality—with RR flatly "unemotional," while others gave their panic, tears and terror. RR said he was able to have their support and was buoyed and lifted by their camaraderie and

> care. They performed together a terrifying escape to a new life in exile. (MM, 2025, personal communication)

In cases like the ones just presented, it can be helpful to see the social therapeutic approach as a kind of *socially created crisis normalization*. Acknowledging what has happened to a person and being there with them without relating to them as traumatized allows space for the group to do something potentially developmental for all.

Creating Our Mental Health

Creating Our Mental Health (COMH) is a decade-long East Side Institute initiative, so named to make clear that it is an activity that participants do together—and to emphasize that the topic under discussion is mental *health*—which can be created and developed—and not mental *illness*—which is diagnosed and treated. The use of poetry, movement and improvisation are springboards for building a community in which new kinds of conversations concerning emotional pain can emerge and flourish. Participants have said that it helps demystify mental health and provides an alternative to traditional mental health approaches.

Originally in person, during the pandemic COMH groups were held online. A monthly online group continues to this day. In 2023, in-person groups began again in neighborhoods of New York City. Taking place in food banks, churches, and shelters for refugees and the homeless in poor neighborhoods, these groups are, speaking socio-culturally, true spaces of crisis normalization.

With a grant from the Taos Institute, a participant-led qualitative study was conducted in 2024. In response to an invitation to share its impact, participants responded like this:

- "Emotional struggles are made normal; they're not treated like this shameful thing."
- "As others share, we all become more open."
- "Each time, I discover emotional feelings I didn't even know I was feeling."
- "We help each other find ways to deal with impossible things."
- "Men [in the group] opened up, that broke a stereotype for me."
- "You'll be surprised... Creating Our Mental Health is a place where you can discover, in a light and no-judgment atmosphere, a depth in yourself."
- "We create a space for everyone. We say to everyone, bring us your trauma and pain."

At the end of 2024, COMH began a collaboration with Let the Girl Be, a newly established NGO in Mukono, Uganda on the shore of Lake Victoria. Let the Girl Be was founded to support the educational, cultural and emotional development of girls and young women vulnerable to prostitution and unwanted pregnancy. It has a vocational training program, a cultural program of dance, music and performance, and, most recently, a monthly online COMH session on WhatsApp.

The final illustration of social therapeutic practice is of an early COMH session with Let the Girls Be. It is from one of the social therapeutic facilitators of the group session, sharing the work of "making something with pain" and "working with trauma'."

TF: One of the teenage girls, "G," in the Let the Girl Be group had suffered abuse from her father. She came to the group asking for help to figure out whether or not to forgive him as he'd demanded. She abhorred doing that but also felt that she was obligated to respond and forgive. She asked the group, "What do I do?"

For years, her domineering father had been physically and emotionally abusive to everyone in the family. He beat G's mother publicly in the back yard of their rural home. Most recently he'd wielded a hot metal spatula as a branding iron and attacked her brother, whom he claimed was not his real son.

The ensuing discussion about the "domestic violence" that many in the group had also experienced, was not something the group has jumped into before. With G.'s offer, it was a new moment. The group responded with many voices and questions. They asked about some of the assumptions she was making, namely, *that* she *had to do something.* "But why? Why do you think you have to respond to your father who's asking for your forgiveness?"

The activity of asking these questions and making these observations, brought other voices into her (until then) private/privatized ordeal. It brought some air into the room – others' reactions, and some new suggestions of possibilities. Beyond feeling bad for G., her story was now theirs.

> The group shared their take on her situation: that her father's behavior is typical of many men they knew. That many of them had suffered similarly at the hands of men in their families. And yes, children are supposed to show deference, but do parents have the right to inflict these punishments and demands on their children?
>
> Rather than getting further into the specifics of her father's abusive actions (other than to acknowledge that this was hard and painful), the group conversation explored *G's relationship to the abuse* and to his demand, i.e., to her conflict over how to respond. Their work together continued to build the group. The group modeled *the how* of socializing fear, humiliation and shame. And in so doing, transformed the local culture of being alone with her father's violence. (TF, 2025, personal communication)

We Don't Keep Score

The Developing Across Borders and Creating Our Mental Health groups are not havens. To paraphrase Fred Newman, there are no havens, no places to hide from the cruelty and pain. There is, however, community. We can create community. Not to hide out in, but to actively and continuously nourish and develop those who are creating it (Newman, 1991).

This, then, is the social therapeutic response to the question that opened this chapter: "How do we meet suffering?"

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