On the Journey

Summer 2008

TOOLS FOR LIVING

from MICHELLE BARONE, MA, MFT
www.michellebarone.net
818-951-7744

Why Therapy? Exploring the Strengths of Seeking Help

Long before there were therapists, there were family members. Grandpa and Aunt Jane listened, or gave us advice, or sometimes just told us to buck up. If family couldn't help, there were friends or a clergy member. But most likely, we were also warned not to broadcast our troubles, and many people suffered their mental problems silently.

Times change, and so has society's acceptance of seeking help. The old stigma of being seen as weak or incapable is largely gone, helped by many well-known writers, actors and politicians being open about their struggles with, and treatments for, everything from depression to chronic shoplifting. Going to a therapist is now seen as a positive step in most people's lives.

"Therapy is a unique relationship and what makes it valuable sets it apart from friendships, working partnerships, family connections and love affairs," says Carl Sherman, author of *How to Go to Therapy: Making the Most of Professional Help*.

In his book, Sherman describes therapy as a balance in which two people are "collaborating on a single project: helping you deal with your problems and achieve the change you want. There is no other agenda."

It's the simplicity of that agenda, combined with a structured schedule, confidentiality and trust, that make this unique relationship work so well for so many people. Rather than proof that someone is "sick," it is a sign of good health to make a commitment to change.

Some people still believe a therapist will make them lie on a couch. While some therapists might have couches in their offices, you choose where to sit. You choose what to say. You choose when to say it.

And, nowadays, there is an incredible number of ways to explore problems. Beyond conventional talk therapy, there is art therapy, music therapy, somatic therapy—even laughter therapy—to name just a few. For every kind of problem, and every kind of person, there is a therapeutic healing modality that fits.

The strength of therapy is that there are no strings attached. In his book, Sherman offers some further benefits of the therapeutic relationship:

1. *Safety.* If the relationship is right, you can feel safe to reveal your fears, dreams and fantasies without fear of repercussions or judgment on the part of the therapist. Unlike telling a friend or family member, your words to a therapist won't come back to haunt you.

2. *Confidentiality.* The therapist is bound by ethics and law (except in a few well-defined cases) not to reveal what you have said during sessions. This adds to the feeling of safety and trust, and aids in people making changes.

3. *Learning.* Therapy can be seen as a deeply educational experience, in which a therapist acts like a coach or teacher to help the client see the world—inner and outer—in new and positive ways.

Into each life some rain must fall, and we all have felt deluged at least once in our lives. Grief, loss, anger, financial hardship, relationship problems, stress—all of these are a normal part of life. So is seeking help when coping is just too hard. It's also normal to be a little afraid of what friends and family might say about seeing a therapist. But, in the end, it's your life, and you know best how to make it a richer, happier and more fulfilling one—with a little help. ✻

10 Things to be Grateful For

Yes, we're thankful for our health, our safety, our loved ones. But what else? What do we take for granted? What moves us? What would fill our hearts daily if we would just notice it?

1. The senses. Sight, sound, touch, taste and smell—daily miracles each of them.

2. The plant world. From the productivity of a late-summer tomato plant to the delicate unfurling of a fern, nature's exuberance and tenderness is something to behold.

3. Opportunity. Our steady companion, opportunity is always ready to take us down a path yet unknown. (Hint: We have to say "Yes!")

4. Beauty. What do your eyes feast on? What splendor makes your soul rejoice? It is all around us every day. How often do you stop to drink it in?

5. The ability to learn. There is no age limit on learning—period. When we stop learning, we really stop living.

6. Young children. They model for us innocence, faith, resilience, playfulness and unconditional love.

7. Music. What inspires you, lifts your mood? Rock & roll, African drumming, violin concertos, Turkish ud, gospel? A nightingale?

8. The ability to give. Every act of love benefits the giver as much as the receiver.

9. Color. Sunsets, Gauguin paintings, green peppers, blue eyes. Imagine a world without color.

10. Change. It's unavoidable; the only constant. Change can be unsettling or challenging. But the mystery of it and what lies beyond it can keep us young at heart. ✻

A Letter From

Michelle Barone, MA, MFT

I would like to thank you for reading my newsletter. My intention is to give you good information, support your life's journey and expand your self-awareness.

My life's passion is reflected in my work. As a family therapist and educator, I love helping people bring joy in their lives, and find creative solutions to challenges.

My journey in this field started when I earned my B.A. in Human Development and teaching credentials from Pacific Oaks College, a progressive teachers college. I taught for several years at a residential center for seriously emotionally disturbed children. I then earned my M.A. in Marriage and Family Therapy and began my private practice. I began to work with new parents and found a special affinity in this area. I brought my knowledge of child development and progressive/alternative education to my work.

Currently, I work with individuals, couples, families, children and teens. I bring my knowledge of interpersonal neurobiology, mind/body therapy and alternative health/education to my work. I maintain a large referral base of supportive health care providers. I currently serve on the board of the Glendale Area Mental Health Professional Association as the e-list facilitator.

Services Offered

- *Individual, couple, family counseling*
- *Healing grief and loss*
- *Mind/body therapy*
- *Stress management*
- *Alternative education/homeschooling support*
- *Parenting classes and support groups*

Office and phone sessions by appointment.

Please visit my website www.michellebarone.net for listings of groups, classes and speaking engagements.

Treat yourself gently,

Michelle Barone, MA, MFT

How Well Are You Listening to Your Children (or to Other People)?

When our children come to us with a problem, we usually want to help them. So we console, interpret, advise, distract or praise. Other times, we feel we must teach our children, and so we interrogate, lecture, moralize or order. And probably more often than we'd like, we respond angrily—blaming, criticizing, ridiculing, shaming or withdrawing.

However, all of these responses are problematic—whether with our children or with the adults in our lives. They often serve to stop the communication of real feelings and the development of individual solutions. Take the quiz below, adapted from the classic Parent Effectiveness Training, *by Dr. Thomas Gordon, to assess your listening skills.*

True False

❍ ❍ 1. I let my children feel their difficult feelings, knowing that comments such as "Everyone goes through this" deny the strength of their feelings.

❍ ❍ 2. I listen for the need beneath the words and respond to that.

❍ ❍ 3. I check in to see if I've understood something in the way my child intended to mean it. When I do, I try to keep my own feelings, opinions and guidance out of it.

❍ ❍ 4. When my child tells me something, I try to respond with either noncommittal phrases (such as "I see") or with an invitation to say more (such as "Go ahead, I'm listening").

❍ ❍ 5. I notice that when I listen to my children's problems (rather than make suggestions or give advice), my children often come up with their own excellent solutions.

❍ ❍ 6. When I hear out my children fully, they are often much more willing to listen to my thoughts and ideas.

❍ ❍ 7. When I let my children express their feelings openly and completely, the feelings often seem to disappear quickly.

❍ ❍ 8. If I don't have the time to listen to my child right at that moment, I say so and make time for it later.

❍ ❍ 9. I've learned to trust that my children can find good solutions to their problems on their own.

❍ ❍ 10. I understand that my children are separate, unique individuals, and that their feelings and perceptions are not necessarily the same as mine.

❍ ❍ 11. When I stay away from moralizing, interpreting, ordering and advising, I find that I learn a lot more about my children. Sometimes, I even learn *from* my children.

❍ ❍ 12. I know that just listening doesn't always bring about immediate change and that it's sometimes OK to leave things on an inconclusive or incomplete note.

Authentic communication with our children (and friends) has rewards more valuable than a pot of gold. Real listening may be the rainbow bridge we need to get there. If you scored fewer "true" answers than false, you may benefit from improving your listening skills.

© 2008 Claire Communications

Healing from Trauma: Putting Yourself Back Together Again

Two individuals are robbed at gunpoint. One experiences overwhelming helplessness and has a hard month. But by the end of that time, he has pretty much resolved and integrated the incident into his life. The other person experiences intense rage. Years later, she is still struggling with the negative, life-changing aftermath of the trauma.

As seen in the above example, not everyone reacts to trauma in the same way. Just as pain thresholds differ, so do trauma thresholds. But as William Shakespeare wrote in his play *Othello*, "What wound did ever heal but by degrees?"

Having studied trauma intensively over the past couple of decades, researchers now know that a traumatic event's impact depends on the *perception* of it. Perception is influenced by a number of factors including age, physical characteristics, level of support, etc. Thus, emotional trauma can result from a single extreme and deeply felt experience or from a series of low-intensity events. Even everyday happenings—falls, difficult births, betrayals, medical/dental procedures—can cause the same lingering traumatic effects as extreme or violent events, such as physical abuse, combat or serious accidents.

Fortunately, even traumatic effects that linger for years can be resolved, and the result can be a new present-day reality that includes, but is not dominated by, a traumatic past.

"The same immense energies that create the symptoms of trauma, when properly engaged and mobilized, can transform the trauma and propel us into new heights of healing, mastery and even wisdom," writes Peter Levine, author of *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma.*

The Natural Trauma Response

Levine and others contend that emotional trauma goes unhealed when the natural trauma response is interrupted and feelings unleashed by the event remain unresolved. Because of this, anxiety, anger, depression, guilt, hopelessness, self-blame, shame and other feelings freeze up inside of us.

That "freeze" is not just emotional, but physical as well. Recent research indicates that parts of the brain become altered by traumatic events. These disruptions are actually visible on brain scans.

Just what is a natural trauma response? It's the whole continuum of emotional and physical sensations that occur with the first inclination that something is wrong or dangerous. To understand it, Levine suggests looking at how animals respond to danger, real or perceived.

After the animal has instinctively chosen to fight, flee or freeze, and the danger has passed, the animal trembles throughout its entire body, "shedding" the tension required for alertness and quick response.

Human response to danger—real or perceived—can also involve shaking, sweating, crying, laughing or shuddering. Just like the animal, such responses are natural and part of the body's effort to return to a state of equilibrium. They are crucial to the recovery process, and they may go on for hours, days or weeks.

Too often, however, we deny this process or don't give it its due. We say to ourselves or hear from others, *Pull yourself together. Forget about it. Get up and shake it off. It's time to get on with your life.*

And when we do that, when we ignore the emotional and physical sensations that continue after a traumatizing event, we interrupt the natural cycle, short-circuiting our natural ability to heal. It is this, more than anything, that sets us up for a damaging traumatic aftermath.

"The animal's ability to rebound from threat can serve as a model for humans," Levine writes. "It gives us a direction that may point the way to our own innate healing abilities."

Trauma's Effects on Basic Human Needs

The incidence of serious negative events that typically evoke traumatic response is surprisingly pervasive in our culture today. A 20-year study released in 2005 by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that of the 17,337 middle-class participants, a startling 64% had experienced one or more of eight categories of traumatic childhood events.

The study showed a significant connection between this childhood trauma and disease, depression, drug use and/or suicide.

Perhaps that is because unresolved trauma can undermine basic human needs. Dena Rosenbloom and Mary Beth Williams, authors of *Life After Trauma: A Workbook for Healing*, identify these basic needs as safety, trust, a measure of control over one's life, self-worth and intimacy.

These writers and others stress that it is not necessary to relive one's emotional pain in order to heal trauma. For some, doing so may trigger re-traumatization. Focus on what you can do today. Pay attention to your feelings and reactions, seek helpful support, learn from others who've "been there," allow yourself to grieve and above all, take your time. ❊

"Normal" Is a Very Big Playing Field

Harold likes to take his drum to the park, where he wails and beats on it in solitude.

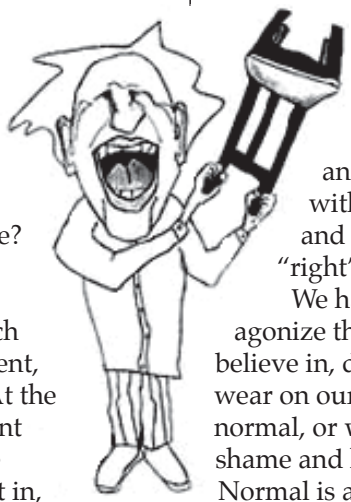
Susan talks to her grandmother's ghost.

Jamie has 60 potted plants around her house—all in purple pots.

Is there something wrong with these people? Are they normal?

Most of us live with an internal struggle. Each of us yearns to be different, special, an individual. At the same time, we don't want to lean too far out of the tree—we also want to fit in, be accepted…be normal.

But what does it mean to be normal? Even experts struggle with the word; medical textbooks use words such as "usual" and "not ill" and "conforming to a cultural norm." However, what is usual to one group of people—tattooing, to give one example—may be completely weird and repulsive to another group. Does that make it normal or abnormal?



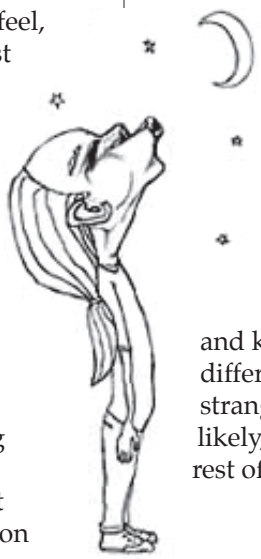
The real danger comes in labels—the ones we put on each other and the ones we call ourselves. People who don't fit in are often labeled as abnormal or different, and that stigma can eat into their feelings of self-worth and belonging. Our culture, with its narrow definitions and media depictions of the "right" way to be, doesn't help.

We harm ourselves when we agonize that something we feel, believe in, dream about or just wear on our bodies is not normal, or when we feel shame and hide things. Normal is a big playing field and most of us fit somewhere on that field.

Or, as comedienne Whoopi Goldberg puts it, "Normal is nothing more than a cycle on a washing machine."

Still, we worry about being normal. Is it normal to sleep 12 hours instead of eight? Is it normal for my five-year-old son to dress in high heels and pink tutus? Is it normal to grieve a loved one for years? Is it normal to be happy so much of the time? Am I at a normal weight? Is it normal to want to be alone a lot? Is it normal to spend hours on the computer? Is it normal to be afraid of dogs? Is it normal to be the only person crying in a movie theater when everyone else is laughing?

We limit ourselves when we try to fit ourselves into a box labeled "normal."



It can be an awfully unimaginative, stifling, boring place to be. In trying to be normal or to fit in, we may shut down those parts of us that define who we really are.

So, take a deep breath, and know that you may be different, you may even be a little strange in some areas—but most likely, you are as "normal" as the rest of us. ✻

Michelle Barone, MA MFT
Sunland, CA

Phone: 818-951-7744
Website: www.michellebarone.net
E-mail: Michelle@michellebarone.net

Hear Michelle speak at the **California Homeschool Network Family Expo, August 1, 2 & 3.** For information on this and on workshops that Michelle can do for your group, call **818-951-7744** or email Michelle at **Michelle@michellebarone.net.**