



# Healing trauma with metaphoric cards

Survivors of disasters can fall into a vortex of helpless despair – or climb a healing spiral using a variety of resources. One effective tool to aid recovery is the deck of COPE cards

by Dr. Ofra Ayalon

Crisis and disaster are part of life. We are exposed to dangerous environments through war and terrorism, ecological, natural or technological disasters and urban violence. Poverty, racial persecution and physical or sexual abuse also cause suffering and trauma, as do individual crises such as loss and death of dear ones, destruction and loss of home, abandonment and betrayal.

## The trauma vortex

Survivors of such disasters are often left feeling helpless or depressed, plagued with guilt or anger, caught in the *trauma vortex*. This metaphor, coined by Peter Levine<sup>1</sup>, describes the whirlpool of chaos in the aftermath of trauma. Also called the 'black hole' of trauma, it is a downward spiral that traps the traumatised, who may find it difficult to control their sensations, images, feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Their essential needs for safety are shaken, as is the right to exist without danger, the sense of competency and the ability to control one's destiny. Anger and rage mount, coupled with a deep sense of powerlessness at their inability to right the

situation. The rage can be turned against inwards or against others.

Trauma, then, can create a vortex that pulls people down and tempts them to adopt the victim identity, to the detriment of all previous personal achievements and future plans. When the 'traumatic narrative' takes over, it becomes the centre of our thoughts, feelings and relationships. The price for adopting victimhood is giving up control over one's life. One example was H, a survivor of an Israeli school disaster, where adolescents were held as hostages and 22 of them killed. Twenty years later, H still signed all his letters as 'victim of the Ma'alot massacre'. He visited the graves of his schoolmates every day, apologising to them for his survival<sup>2</sup>.

## From victim to victor

A different outcome of trauma can be a *healing spiral* that pulls people up. People are apt to find inner hidden resources, and transform their priorities by attending to family, social and spiritual values.

How do we make the choice to move from being a victim

to becoming a victor? Some do it by taking an active role in resolving the trauma, assuming responsibility for self-healing, assuming responsibility for healing others. Others may choose compassion and forgiveness. One dramatic example is the forgiveness rituals engaged in by the Amish community in Pennsylvania after six girls were killed by a local milk lorry driver<sup>3</sup>. Some survivors focus on altruistic work and lobby for important social causes. One example is Mrs. G, the mother of a murdered girl, who wished to spare the life of her daughter's murderer and made it her life mission to fight against the death penalty in California<sup>4</sup>.

There are healing methods that will help traumatised individuals manage their hyperarousal and contain their explosiveness and hypersensitivity. This can be done by shedding light on the pull of the trauma vortex, and providing knowledge and practice of coping resources. It is, however, imperative to understand the nature of traumatic reactions and how individuals and groups vacillate between the two vortices, from hope, optimism,

energy and altruism to fatigue, frustrations, disillusionment, polarised thinking and back again<sup>5</sup>.

### **COPE – the art of healing**

When trauma is beyond words, we look for non-verbal and psychologically safe methods of expression and sharing. People are relieved when offered the opportunity to approach their painful experiences step by step, starting by using symbols and metaphors. One of the most effective tools in eliciting healing metaphors is a set of illustrated cards called COPE cards, that belong to a specially designed genre of associative cards (the OH-cards series).

COPE cards, initiated by myself, painted by the Russian artist Marina Lukyanova and issued by the German publisher Moritz Egetmeyer, represent an international joint effort to deal with the consequences of traumatic events and help heal psychic wounds<sup>6</sup>. The 88 cards enable their users, whether playfully or therapeutically, to access deep feelings and narrate their experiences. By using COPE cards, participants can learn to identify their own particular ways of coping with crisis, stress and trauma. The experience of randomly selecting cards and dealing with the associations they evoke can elicit new ideas and possibilities, instead of repeating familiar patterns of thought and response. COPE cards help us reach our inner pain and discover our inner strength. A sort of 'virtual training' takes place in dealing with challenging situations, in surfing beyond time and space, in experimenting with possible solutions to conflict-laden issues – all within the safe world of image and metaphor<sup>7</sup>.

### **BASIC Ph coping modes**

In the process of researching for ways of promoting resilience and healthy ways of coping, we have developed a new model of 'coping resources' acronymed BASIC Ph. This is a holistic multimodal framework that contains six modes of coping resources: **B**elief systems, **A**ffective expression, **S**ocial support, **I**magination/creativity, **C**ognitive processing, **P**hysical behaviour<sup>8,9</sup>. These six modalities merge into one in our worldwide trauma-coping training programs, and are represented by six COPE 'hand' cards (see previous page):

1. **Belief** systems refer to faith in God or a supernatural power, trust in other human beings or trust in oneself. Faith and hope are well-documented mental coping resources with trauma<sup>10</sup>.
2. **Affect** is the feeling aspect of consciousness. The heart symbolises love and hate, fear and courage, grief and joy, jealousy and compassion etc. This coping mode involves chiefly the ability to recognise feelings and name them, and then to express them by verbalising (telling, writing, dramatising) or by nonverbal activities, such as free play, dance, painting, sculpting or music.
3. **Social** coping skills focus on interaction with others. Such interactions include the giving and receiving of support by family members, friends and also professional helpers. In the aftermath of trauma, there is a strong need to bear witness – the traumatic experiences need to be acknowledged, expressed, listened to, witnessed by caring others, tolerated, contained, treated and healed.
4. **The Imaginative/metaphoric** mode is the key to coping when traumatic experiences are 'beyond words'. It offers many

creative ways of expressing painful memories. Images in the COPE cards elicit personal hidden memories or fantasies related to the traumatic experience. Any COPE card (or combination of several cards) can function as an opportunity to surpass dire reality and find solace in imagination.

5. **Cognitive reprocessing** means using cognitive skills to make sense of the trauma narrative as it unfolds in reaction to the visual images of the cards. This is yet another mode of gaining control over posttraumatic issues and painful memories. The purpose of re-telling the traumatic story is to re-visit the scene in safe mode (thereby releasing its grip of terror and horror), analyse and understand the demand of the situation, and plan strategies of rescue and coping.

6. **Physical (body/mind) coping modes**. The trauma is stored in the body. Levine<sup>1</sup> suggests the use of body awareness and somatic experience for unfreezing the somatic trauma and regaining body-mind control. These methods are used to build a flexible balancing of tension and relaxation, establish body-boundaries and re-examine the relationship between personal space and trust.

The other projective-metaphoric cards in the set, which support verbal and nonverbal expressive methods, help to access repressed experiences. We have found this multimodal approach most effective in helping people cope with trauma and negotiate ways of resolving conflicts in situations of violent armed conflicts, suicide prevention and domestic violence. In actual traumatic situations, people usually employ a combination of coping styles to survive.

### **Getting started**

The first step toward recovery and healing is to reach physical and psychological safety and security. In this safe space, it is possible to vent feelings by verbal and nonverbal means, to share dreams, nightmares and other traumatic reactions. When appropriate, mourning and memorial rituals can promote positive affirmations of resilience.

Any COPE card or combination of cards can serve as a trigger for the narration of the event and responses to it. Using the COPE Cards provides an opportunity for recounting personal recollections of traumatisation in a safe environment, since metaphoric stories triggered by the visual images of the cards are one step removed from anguished reality. This 'creative distance' facilitates recall and the working through of trauma experience. The use of image and imagination serves as a protective screen against being overwhelmed by intense emotions. When the memories become too much to bear, one can always return to the imagined story, or look for other cards that may serve as anchors for a sense of thriving, surviving and healing.

### **Identifying coping skills**

This activity aims to discover our normal ways of coping, and also identify those coping modes that are blocked in times of crisis. What resources would be required to make them available in times of need?

1. Spread the six COPE 'hand cards' face up on the table, and identify each of them according to the BASIC Ph model (Belief, Affect, Social, Imaginative, Cognitive, Physical modes).
2. Pick six cards at random



from the COPE cards deck and place them face down on top of the 'hand cards', so that each 'hand card' is covered by one card.

3. Turn the top cards up, one at a time, and reflect how they connect to the 'hand card' that represents one coping mode. Let the top card help you describe how you use the relevant coping mode in your life, in a positive or a negative way. For example: My 'imagination' coping mode helps me detach myself from my worries (positive), and my 'social' coping mode makes me needy and over-dependant on others (negative).

4. Now, think of a time in your life when you experienced severe stress or crisis. Turn the remaining COPE cards face up and choose three cards that describe this experience.

5. Try to identify which of the coping modes you have employed to deal with that crisis. Use the cards to tell the story of your coping.

6. Try also to identify those modes that you have not used – and turn their representative cards face down. These cards represent those coping modes that were blocked by the traumatic event.

7. Find cards that will help you reactivate those blocked modes.

8. Reflect on the whole process of how you identified your existing resources for coping with crisis and how you activated additional resources. Share your reflections. Re-tell the story of your traumatic experience, and how it was

transformed by the use of all six coping modes.

### The tsunami: examples

The following are examples of the variety of coping modes emerging from COPE cards work with survivors of the tsunami disaster in Thailand<sup>11</sup>. The stories were triggered by the COPE cards as a response to the question: What helped you most during and after the disaster?

**Belief** in God or in supernatural powers: 'At the time of the Tsunami I was praying in the mosque. The wave arrived abruptly, flooded the street, circulated the mosque and did not touch it. A miracle happened and I was saved with the grace of God.'

**Affect** and expression of their feelings: 'There was a time when I experienced an immense feeling of pain inside me. It's hard to explain. I could not find words to share my feelings with my friends. I did not dare burden them with my agony. That's why these cards were so important for me: they allowed me to deal with my own feelings, same as everybody else in our group. I am not ashamed any longer. It is a relief.'

**Social skills**: 'I volunteered to help people who were hurt. Their suffering was much greater than mine. By helping others I helped myself.'

**Imagination**: 'Do you want to know how I was saved from death? As I was drowning, I imagined a strong rope in the water. I seized it and pulled myself up. I was saved, in spite of

the fact that there was no real rope in the water.'

**Cognitive** solutions, the search for information and understanding: 'Two weeks after the tsunami, I still could not fall asleep. So night after night I searched for information about tsunami on the web. Then I started visiting schools and sharing my newly acquired knowledge. That is why they sent me to this training.'

**Physical** activity: 'I had to immerse myself in the hard work of cleaning the debris of the storm. This was the only way I could manage my anxiety and sadness.' Another teacher said: 'Working with children, I succeeded in calming them down by engaging them in vigorous movements until they tired, sat quietly, breathed deeply and relaxed.'

### In conclusion

There is no one single appropriate method of coping for all situations, all people or all ages. Each person, family, and community has their specific combination of coping modes, which constitutes their basic coping language. The effective way for the therapist to help is to join the victims' basic language, and then guide them in developing additional coping resources.

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