

# Trauma and the Body: An Introduction to Three Books



by EDWARD T. WELCH

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We are resilient people, or so it would seem. Children bounce back after feeling devastated by a third-grade friend who publicizes a secret crush. Undone at first, they barely remember the event two days later and are back to confiding in the town crier. We make a mistake on the basketball court and our team loses. By the next month, we rarely think about it, though when we do, observers might notice the slight cringe.

The ability to keep going is not only reserved for these more everyday events. We can be raised on an alcoholic's lies, unpredictable violence, being cursed at daily, and feeling utterly isolated during the critical years of our early life. When we refer to those parts of our past, we might seem unmoved by them, even as friends gasp at the retelling. Then we go off to our jobs at which we can be quite successful.

We are, indeed, resilient. We *can* keep doing the essentials of life even when carrying what seem to be unbearable burdens. But these heavy burdens—these *traumas*—do exact a cost. They intrude into our present and disrupt our relationships. Unless we do something, they will continue to disrupt and isolate.

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An added complexity of past traumas is that they do not always announce themselves in the present. Old memories can be spotty. The connection between past events and present struggles can be vague. As a general rule, survivors would rather leave traumatic intrusions either unexamined or explained by current events and relationships.

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These traumas come in many forms. What unites them is that they typically have some connection to death. For example, those who have witnessed the unexpected death of others can still see the details of the events and can identify that something changed within them. But death includes more than end-of-life events. It also gathers in all kinds of victimization, abuse, battering, oppression, evils—all echoes of the satanic. How we come to terms with these past pains is, indeed, a perennial concern for counselors, pastors, and all believers; and it is on this that I want to set our sights. I will do this by considering a few pieces of the massive literature on the topic.

Before considering this secular literature, we know this: Scripture invites trauma survivors through scores of portals. Open at random to the psalms and you find descriptions of dire suffering by which the psalmist gives the sufferer words to speak to the Lord. Israel faced a destitute wilderness, neighboring nations that could exterminate them if they lost one battle, and life in exile. The New Testament epistles were written to a church rejected and facing death. We will categorically miss these if we are waiting for the word *trauma* to appear. But if we look for satanic opposition in its varied forms, then the human experience of trauma appears everywhere. My consideration of some of the secular literature is not a result of Scripture's silence.

As a way into the trauma literature, I have chosen three books. My focus will be on the most recent of the three, *The Body Keeps the Score*:

*Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, by Bessel van der Kolk.<sup>1</sup> This book, in one stop, gives you access to the significant discussions within the field, including the recent emphasis on how the body “remembers” trauma. But this book is one of a long line that includes notables such as Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*<sup>2</sup> and Antonio Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens*.<sup>3</sup> I will begin with these two. Then I will offer an extended discussion on van der Kolk.

I have chosen books that, I believe, have useful content. My goals are to understand and learn from experienced people, and to think Christianly about non-Christian literature. I will not specialize in critique.

### **Judith Herman: *Trauma and Recovery***

Judith Herman is a psychiatrist who established the modern work of trauma care. She has broadly studied various kinds of trauma—war, illegal captivity, child abuse, battered women, and sexual victimization in adults—and demonstrated their shared aftermath. She is careful and compassionate in her in-depth descriptions and she proposes useful guidelines for counselors. She is also prescient in her assessment that trauma studies will always be controversial and politicized because they take up the cause of the weak and oppressed and hope to expose the strong, who are usually the ones who have power.

***Descriptions of trauma.*** Herman’s descriptions remain standards in the field. Trauma, especially on-going trauma, changes a person’s body and soul. A survivor’s world is now thoroughly unsafe, which leaves the person hyper-attentive and always on alert. The past intrudes through nightmares, flashes of old memory, and unpredictable and unruly physical experiences<sup>4</sup> in which victims “perceive their bodies as having turned against them” (p.86).

<sup>1</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992, 1997, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotions in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Herman cites being unable to relax, pacing, crying, screaming, gastrointestinal disturbances, headaches, choking sensations, and other chronic somatic experiences.

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