DVD REVIEW

Families, trauma and stress
by Charles Figley, Hamilton McCubbin, Lenore Terr and Zahava Solomon

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This is the first in a series of four DVD presentations on the effects of trauma, stress, and risk on individuals and families. The DVD, which introduces key themes in the systemic effects of trauma, is well illustrated by means of three case studies. Four international experts on the recognition and treatment of traumatic reactions extend trauma work to entire family systems, with the ‘ripple effect’ as illustrative metaphor. The case studies include the families of an estate agent who was raped, a nine month-old boy misdiagnosed with neuroblastoma, and a married navy nurse who was unexpectedly sent to serve in the Gulf War. The linearly construed individual stress paradigm is amplified to cover family reverberations and secondary traumatisation as a result of the unwanted disruption of family life.

The coverage of the topic is clear and concise, and serves as a useful, albeit somewhat dry, overview of research and treatment of families in distress. The reader is introduced to the:

- types of exposure to trauma (simultaneous, secondary, vicarious, and intrafamilial traumatisation);
- severity of stressors (from normative to catastrophic);
- degree of family vulnerability (effects of pile-up, communication style, and so on);
- expectable as well as preventable symptoms, such as unchanneled aggression, rage, omens, fears, and symptomatic ways of attempting to regain control and meaning.

Illustrations of dysfunctional family reaction patterns, family re-organisation to deal with symptoms, and personality changes are provided, and the viewer is
led into family utilisation of resources, crisis intervention of the brief and trauma focussed variety, as well as rebuilding of family organisation and structure. Various components of intervention are outlined:

- Recapitulation (relationship building, abreaction, individual stories and universality as curative factors, acknowledging different memories, admitting fears, and normalising experiences);
- Empowerment (restimulation of family resources, activation of learning, restoration of pro-active power);
- Deconditioning/defusing omens and fears (schedules of family deconditioning, instilling a sense of mastery, regaining power and control, dealing with family fears in manageable steps, and introducing the idea of bad luck rather than catastrophising causal thinking in the family);
- Family healing (open discussion of family reactions, dealing with future trauma, perceiving each family member as a piece of the puzzle, developing a sense of shared meaning and common memory, and the avoidance of punctuating on one family member – the identified patient phenomenon).

The DVD is a systematic introduction to the nodal themes in traumatic stress work; the sudden inversion of family reality, coupled with mystification and ambiguity – the intensifiers of symptom severity. This is a useful addition to training and research media.

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**Therapists:** Drs Charles Figley, Hamilton McCubbin, Lenore Terr, and Zahava Solomon  
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**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

**Ricky Snyders** is a professor in the Department of Psychology at Unisa. His interests include family and couples psychotherapy, psychotherapy supervision and training, and groups and organisations as systems.