

# How Even “Subtle” Childhood Trauma Can Affect Your Health and Wellness Now



By Lissa Rankin | [lissarankin.com](http://lissarankin.com)

Most of us experience trauma at some level, not just war veterans who witness and experience horrific terror but simply by growing up as vulnerable children in a world where many parents are themselves traumatized and can't always hold that vulnerability safe for a child. You might mistakenly think that you must experience incest, child abuse, parental abandonment, or living in a war zone in order to be traumatized, but trauma can be much more subtle. Psychologist Dawson Church, Ph.D. defines a traumatizing event as something that is:

- Perceived as a threat to the person's physical survival
- Overwhelms their coping capacity, producing a sense of powerlessness

- Produces a feeling of isolation and aloneness
- Violates their expectations

In his book [Psychological Trauma](#), Dawson gives the example of Martie's traumatizing event, which could have lasting consequences but might be easily overlooked if you were not attuned to the kinds of events that can traumatize a child.

*When I was growing up, I idolized my older brother Gary. But he was pretty rough with me. He was six years older than I was. One day when I was three and he was nine, he wanted to have a "wrestling match." He "won" by lying on top of me. I couldn't breathe and I began to panic. Gary just laughed when he saw me struggling. I almost passed out. When he rolled off me, I began to cry uncontrollably. My mother came in, and I tried to explain what happened. He told her it was nothing. I was just being a crybaby. Mom told me, "Big girls don't cry."*

While it might be easily dismissed as just children tussling, this example meets all four criteria for a traumatizing event. Martie thought she was going to die when Gary lay on top of her, so she *perceived a threat to her survival*. She tried to cope by pushing him off, but he was too big so *her coping attempt failed and she felt powerless*. Being smothered by her brother *violated her expectation* that her family would keep her safe. When her mother failed to support and comfort her by dismissing her emotions with "Big girls don't cry," she was left *feeling isolated and alone*.

By this definition of trauma, almost all of us have experienced multiple traumatizing events in our lifetimes. In my case, I had a fairly benevolent childhood, but 12 years of medical training caused me to experience multiple events that meet these criteria for trauma. I also was held up at gunpoint by two masked gunmen in my twenties and had full on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder afterward. Most recently, I was [attacked by a pit bull](#) and started having PTSD-like flashbacks right afterward. Knowing what I know about the link between

unresolved trauma and physical illness, I wanted to be proactive about healing the trauma right away. I am lucky to have at my fingertips a variety of gifted and ethical healers who treat trauma. I reached out right away and asked for help. The flashbacks stopped and haven't come back.

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## **Unhealed Trauma Predisposes to Disease**

As I wrote about in [Mind Over Medicine](#), there is a substantial amount of data linking mental health issues with physical disease. This is not to suggest "it's all in your head." It's absolutely in your body! It's simply that the physiological changes that occur in the body as the result of unhealed trauma and its associated stress, anxiety, and depression translates into conditions in the body that make you susceptible to physical ailments. In a landmark 1990 study of 17,421 patients, Kaiser Permanente and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) collaborated on the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, which has resulted in over 50 peer-reviewed scientific articles. Patients were interviewed to determine whether they had experienced any of ten traumatizing events in childhood:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Mother treated violently
- Household substance abuse
- Household mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member

The study revealed that traumatizing childhood events are

commonplace. Two-thirds of individuals reported at least one traumatizing childhood event. 40% of the patients reported two or more traumatizing childhood events, and 12.5% reported four or more. These results were then correlated with the physical health of the interviewed patients, and researchers discovered a dose-response. Traumatizing events in childhood were linked to adult disease in all categories—cancer, heart disease, chronic pain, autoimmune diseases, bone fractures, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, depression, smoking, and suicide. The average age of patients in this study was 57 years old, which means that childhood trauma can have a delayed effect on the body, making it entirely possible that something that happened 50 years ago may be predisposing someone to illness in the here and now. The more Adverse Childhood Events an individual reported, the sicker and more resistant to the treatment they were.

## **The Good News: Trauma Can Be Healed**

If you're someone who checks "yes" to these and many other traumatizing events, you might be feeling anxious right about now. Does this mean that if you've experienced trauma in your life, you're now a ticking time bomb just waiting to get sick? Does it mean that you won't be healed from your chronic illness? Does it mean the damage is done and it's too late to undo it?

No no no. That's not what I'm suggesting at all. The good news is that we now understand that unresolved trauma, whether from childhood or adulthood, can be treated and cured. Such treatment may also have direct effects on physical health.

Psychologists didn't always know this. They used to believe that children who experienced severe trauma were sort of damaged goods, at risk for many other challenges in adulthood—such as physical and mental illness, addiction, criminal behavior, domestic violence, obesity, and suicide. Such trauma was believed to be largely untreatable. Now,

thanks to evolving methodologies for treating trauma successfully, such as Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing ([EMDR](#)), Emotional Freedom Technique ([EFT](#)), Advanced Integrative Therapy ([AIT](#)).

[Somatic Experiencing](#), and [Psych-K](#), we know better. Trauma can be treated, and if you've experienced trauma, treatment can be not only preventive medicine but also the treatment of disease.

These cutting edge treatments for trauma recognize that talk therapy is inadequate to treat trauma. In fact, it can actually be harmful and retraumatizing, not to mention ineffective. When traumatized people are asked to replay the trauma through talk therapy, they often dissociate from their bodies, escaping into a safe witness consciousness, where they discuss the trauma from this disembodied, numbed out witness position, since that's what they had to do to cope during the initial trauma. The newer trauma treatments make use of the understanding that trauma can only be truly healed when you stay in your body while addressing the often overwhelming emotions that accompany trauma, titrating your exposure to the trauma in small doses so as not to disembody and dissociate. Newer techniques for treating trauma often require very little talking, are careful to avoid retraumatizing, and can be very effective, quick, and permanent—with surprising and exciting effects not just on mental health, but on physical health, especially for those recalcitrant conditions that fail to respond to even the best Western or alternative medical treatment.

## **To Treat Disease, We Must Normalize and Treat Trauma**

We know from copious data studying war veterans with PTSD in VA hospitals that, without any doubt, trauma and illness are

linked. Yet in spite of all the solid scientific data linking trauma and disease, conventional Western medicine still tends to turn a blind eye to this strong correlation, and many patients are also resistant to considering treatment of trauma as part of a prescription for a healthy body. When was the last time your doctor told you to get treatment for your trauma as part of your cancer therapy, autoimmune disease, or heart disease? If you were asked to get trauma treatment as part of comprehensive, integrative medical therapy, how would you react? In my experience, even very progressive integrative medicine doctors rarely bring this up. Instead of focusing on drugs or surgery, they point you to a healthier diet, an herbal supplement, or a whole bunch of expensive functional medicine laboratory tests that aren't usually covered by insurance.

***But what if no drug, surgery, diet, supplement, or fancy lab test can cover up the ongoing, toxic effects of unhealed trauma on the body?***

***What if everything else is merely a Band-Aid, perhaps providing temporary relief but never fully healing the root cause that makes you vulnerable to illness over and over?***

***What if the trauma is at the root of many illnesses in many patients, and until we treat it, even the most cutting edge medical technologies may fail to fully work?***

Perhaps the block around treating trauma as part of a comprehensive medical treatment plan lies in the stigma many attach to trauma as if it's some sort of weakness to have survived a traumatizing event. I suspect that much of the resistance stems from shame about the traumatizing events, which is why the working sociologist [Brené Brown](#), Ph.D. is doing around shame and vulnerability is so important. If shame causes us to bury our trauma in a trauma capsule that we never touch, that trauma can turn into cancer. But if we cultivate shame resilience and we're brave enough to be vulnerable and

get help entering the trauma capsule, miraculous effects are possible. After all, there is absolutely no rational reason to be ashamed if you were sexually abused or abandoned or beaten or neglected. There need not be any shame around getting attacked or bullied or shamed or surrounded by war. Yet shame spirals are common, especially among children who are traumatized. Young psyches somehow translate the trauma into a story that we're not good enough, or we are weak or unlovable.

Yet children are innocent, as are most adults who are traumatized. At the most basic level, it is our innocence that suffers the brunt of the wound, which means that our innocence needs our compassion and our nurturing, not our inner bullying, shaming, or self-violation. Human life is hard. We have to feel our pain and own up to it in order to heal it and alchemize it into [soul growth](#). But even the most awakened people cannot typically bear to enter into the trauma capsule without loving, supportive, masterful help.

## **What If Science Can't Keep up with the Cutting Edge of Sacred Medicine**

When I keynoted at the Association for Comprehensive Energy Psychology ([ACEP](#)) conference last month, I met a handful of cutting edge Energy Psychology practitioners, and after a series of synchronicities made it clear we were supposed to get to know each other better, I spent eight hours talking to one of these Energy Psychology practitioners in depth as part of my research for *Sacred Medicine*. Like many of the individuals I've interviewed for my upcoming *Sacred Medicine* book, Asha Clinton, Ph.D. is a Jungian psychologist, mystic healer, and longtime spiritual practitioner of first Buddhism and then the Sufi tradition. Asha created Advanced Integrative Therapy ([AIT](#)) and has trained over 2000 practitioners in this Energy Psychology technique. What drew me to Asha and AIT was not only the vastness of her presence but the fact that she is using AIT to treat cancer. Although the methodologies used in

AIT appear to be quite cognitive, left brain, and rational, it was clear to me right away that something mystical was underlying this treatment. While most of the other Energy Psychology techniques are being used to treat trauma as it applies to mental health conditions, Asha created protocols that she and other health practitioners are using as part of the prescription for people with cancer—and the great news is that, for those who are ready for this kind of deep psycho-spiritual work, results are promising.

Part of what drew me to Asha was that she wasn't trying to sell me with pseudo-science or earn my validation with muddy data. Although many people at this conference used a lot of scientific languages to try to explain what happens when patients are treated with energy healing and energy psychology techniques, I often start to glaze over when people talk about quantum physics and use language that sounds like "pseudo-science" to try to gain acceptance in the world of science. Frankly, I am concluding that science is simply not advanced enough to keep up with the cutting edge of medicine, and no amount of trying to fit spiritual healing into a science box is going to satisfy the scientist in me. Perhaps science will catch up, and it's important that we continue to try to study that which can be studied in order to protect us from the charlatans of the world. But to dismiss a particular phenomenology something simply because science can't fully explain it seems irresponsibly ignorant. Holding this paradox of my desire for scientific proof and my openness to that which cannot yet be proven is a challenging edge for me, but one I am holding with greater fluidity as I continue this Sacred Medicine journey. From what I can garner, there is not yet scientific verification that AIT works to treat cancer, but there are a number of very compelling anecdotes, enough to hopefully attract the attention of scientists who might be able to track outcomes, much as Dawson Church and his colleagues are doing to validate the more mainstream Energy Psychology technique EFT.

# The Healing Comes from the Divine

Part of my resistance around “energy healers” who try to use the language of energy to explain how their treatments work is that it feels almost disrespectful to that which is doing the healing. Is it really just yet another rational, scientific treatment? Or is it God? (Not that science-based, technologic treatments aren’t also God, but that’s a whole other blog post.) The reason I’m calling my book *Sacred Medicine* is because I don’t think it’s possible to separate energy healing modalities or traditional healing practices like shamanism from spirituality. I would even go so far as to say that Love Itself lies at the root of the healing.

Asha’s work felt like a good fit for this book because right from the get-go, Asha was blatant about saying that AIT is Divine work, that the protocols she has been mystically given in order to create AIT are a gift from God. She is fittingly humble in the way she gives credit where credit is due. The technique she has midwived into the world strikes me as very similar to the way some of the mystical healers who I’ve interviewed operate, but what attracts me to AIT is that Asha has learned how to teach this.

**[Related Article: Why It's Imperative We Shift to the Sacred Matrix Reality that Contains the Healing Powers Of Life](#)**

One of the challenges I’ve faced in researching my *Sacred Medicine* book is that many of these Sacred Medicine practitioners cultivate dependency. They don’t teach the patient how to heal themselves. Instead, they often leave the patient feeling like they need yet another hand on healing or yet another trip to John of God or yet another boost of Divine love as it flows through the healer. And often, the effects of the healing treatment don’t seem to last. What interests me is whether we can learn something from these healers that we can practice on ourselves when we are sick, such as the techniques I described [here](#) and used on myself when I was bitten by the

pit bull.

After all, if the message is always, “You need to find something outside of yourself in order to heal,” I have to pause and wonder. Other than having fewer side effects, how are a dependency on a mystical healer any different than depending on drugs and surgeries, or supplements and magic potions? I am more interested in learning from the healers who have reverse engineered what they do enough to teach others how to reproduce their results and ideally even teach the patient how to employ these methods at home. Is this possible? I don't know. So far, I think it's a paradox. The body is physiologically equipped to heal itself, but perhaps it can't do it alone. Maybe this deep inner work is just too scary and painful to navigate alone. Maybe we are dependent, at least for a short while, on the loving presence of someone who can channel Divine Love, while facilitating and [holding space](#) so that the body can heal itself.

## **What is Advanced Integrative Therapy?**

You can read the details about AIT [here](#), but to summarize in my understanding, the technique Asha developed uses the scientifically controversial “muscle testing” (kinesiology) to run through very detailed protocols that help the practitioner assess which damaging beliefs and unhealed traumas the client has experienced, and which beliefs and traumas need to be treated in which order in order to optimize outcomes. The technique screens not only for Adverse Childhood Events or traumatizing events in adulthood but also for generational trauma, such as the trauma descendants of Nazi Germans or Holocaust Jews might experience, which can alter DNA in offspring. Based on the premise that all upsetting events are types of trauma, and that if left untreated, they become stored within the body, mind and spirit/soul, the intention of AIT is to quickly remove the after effects of such traumatic events and clear the residue of the trauma, as it shows up as

disturbing emotions, limiting beliefs, self-sabotaging behaviors, compulsions, obsessions, dissociation, spiritual blockage, and yes . . . (She had me at hello) . . . physical illnesses like cancer.

To make the claim that psychological and spiritual treatment could be used to treat cancer treads on the dangerous legal territory, and Asha is careful with her words when she talks about it. The governing medical boards are very fussy about protecting patient safety—and their turf—by going after anyone they might deem to be “practicing medicine without a license.” If a nutritionist claims that her green juice cleanse can help treat cancer, or if a psychologist or spiritual healer claims that his can, they’re at risk of getting shut down by the Powers That Be. While I’m grateful we have governing boards to protect patient safety and to hold medical practitioners to high levels of ethics, integrity, and mastery of skills, I also find it shocking that we’ve forgotten what healers have known for millennia—that psycho-spiritual healing is probably the most effective, lasting, and restorative treatment of the majority of physical diseases. To suggest that a trained and licensed psychotherapist might be practicing medicine without a license if they suggest that psycho-spiritual treatment might help treat disease seems like blasphemy to me! After all, the CDC estimates that 75% of all doctor’s visits are induced by emotional stress, and [Occupational Health and Safety](#) bump that number up to 90%. Sure, there are some illnesses that need highly effective physical treatments, such as antibiotics or surgery. But it is often psychological issues that weaken the immune system and predispose to infection or surgical issues in the first place! (Read [Mind Over Medicine](#) if you want to nerd out on the science behind all this.)

## **The Link Between Psycho-Spiritual Wounds**

## **& Physical Illness**

As part of my research for *Sacred Medicine*, I'm traveling the globe to work with shamans in Peru, Qigong masters from China, Hawaiian kahunas, Yogi Swamis, and other kinds of traditional healers, and they all know that psycho-spiritual trauma rides shotgun with physical illness. It's only Westerners, in our Cartesian arrogance, who have split body, mind, and spirit/soul. Yet we are waking up again and remembering what traditional healers have known all along, that body, mind, and spirit/soul cannot be separated. If we treat the body without also treating the root cause of what predisposed the body to illness, the patient will likely get another illness, or cancer will recur, or the disease will fail to respond to even the most aggressive treatment.

## **If You've Experienced Trauma, What Can You Do to Heal It?**

If you're looking to optimize your physical health by getting help for any unresolved traumas, there are a number of ways to get help. Start by checking in with yourself. What modality resonates with your intuition? Is it AIT? EFT? EMDR? Somatic Experiencing? Shamanic healing? Faith healing? A Native American Medicine Man?

I recommend doing your homework and tuning into your intuition before you choose a practitioner. If your practitioner is a licensed health care provider, like a medical doctor or psychotherapist, they are beholden to their respective medical board with regard to ethics, education, mastery, and continuing medical education. But the minute you go outside the system into the realm of traditional healers and energy medicine practitioners who don't also have licensed degrees, you open yourself to two kinds of risks. Some practitioners have mastery but no ethic, while others have ethic but no mastery. In other words, you may bump into some highly gifted

healers, but they may not follow even the most basic medical ethics, such as confidentiality, informed consent, and restraint from having sexual relations with clients. Even more common are the people who are kind, well-intentioned people trying to be of service, people who are basically ethical and mean well, but they're simply not good at what they do and cannot reproduce trustworthy results. In my research into *Sacred Medicine*, I have concluded that just because someone has spiritual power doesn't mean they have spiritual ethic. And just because someone has spiritual ethic doesn't mean they have spiritual power. (I talked about this for 3 ½ hours in The Shadow Of Spirituality Uncensored class I taught. You can listen to the class [here](#) to dive deeper into the topic of spiritual discernment).

I don't say this to scare you or cause you to hesitate to get help if you've been traumatized. I'm just advising that you activate your discernment, ask for referrals, and be ready to sniff out those who are trying to hook you with big claims they can't follow through on or those who might be full on black magicians dressed up in white angel robes.

If you feel drawn to modalities like AIT, EFT, EMDR, or Somatic Experiencing, there are resources online to guide you to psychotherapists who have been trained to practice these techniques.

## **Imagine If Doctors Were Trained to Treat Trauma Alongside Disease**

Doctors and other health care providers have been exploring exactly these kinds of issues in the [Whole Health Medicine Institute](#) that I founded. Those who have been certified to facilitate the [6 Steps to Healing Yourself](#) as outlined in [Mind Over Medicine](#) have gone through the 6 Steps themselves and have been trained to help facilitate patients who are exploring these kinds of psycho-spiritual root causes of

illness. (You can find a list of graduates [here](#)). But we've never overtly included in the training how to treat trauma directly. Asha and I are putting our noodles together to feel into whether there's a potential for collaboration so that the doctors in my network might be trained to not only have awareness of these new treatments for trauma so that they can refer out to licensed practitioners. Perhaps they might also get certified to treat trauma directly. This bypasses the issue of "practicing medicine without a license" and opens up the potential for a whole new approach to disease treatment and prevention within our medical systems. Of course, there are other obstacles to this potential merging of worlds, including how little time doctors have to spend with patients. But as Tosha Silver would say, "It's impossible that doctors could be trained to help treat unhealed trauma in sick people . . . without God."

## **If You've Been Traumatized, Please Get Help**

Let me just close by saying that if you've experienced trauma in your life and you sense that it might be predisposing you to illness or interfering with medical treatment, please know that you are not alone and that there is no shame in having experienced trauma. Most of us have trauma in our bodies, minds, and spirit/souls. We are not alone in our traumas, and we need not hide our pain or resist treating it. Trauma can be cured, and you can have your radiant, vital life back, if only you have the courage to enter the trauma capsule—with expert guidance—and begin to let the trauma dissolve its grip on your life and your body.

Everyone is entitled to their own journey, so it's also OK if you're not ready yet. As my mentor Rachel Naomi Remen, MD says, "You can't force a rosebud to blossom by beating it with a hammer." Maybe all you can handle today is admitting, "I have trauma." That is enough for now. Be kind to yourself. As

Karen Drucker sings in her song” [Gentle With Myself](#),” “I will only go as fast as the slowest part of me is free to go.” But perhaps by gently loving the slowest part, someday you will be ready to heal. Maybe that day begins right now.

With love and wishes for your optimal health,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lissa Rankin". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned below the main text of the letter.

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