

CHANGE THAT ROCKS THE WORLD

Sandra Bloom, MD



Understanding trauma is about changing the way you view the world.

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First came the bad news.

Sandra Bloom, co-director of the Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice at Drexel University's School of Public Health, flashed a slide that showed a cartoon cave-person shouldering a wooden club and staring at the blue glow of a laptop screen; in the background loomed the dark hulks of skyscrapers. The image captured Bloom's urgent point: human beings bring age-old traumas and behaviors into our modern-day lives, and we will continue to do so unless we are willing to acknowledge those traumas and embrace new ways of thinking and acting.

In a keynote presentation, Bloom spoke of the toxic legacy created by war, oppression and dislocation, particularly in a country built by immigrants. "We all have histories of disrupted attachments," she said. "We all got here by leaving home."

She talked about the "disaster" of contemporary parenting, in which many

kids have just one attentive adult in their lives instead of the large kin groups that, historically, shared the work of raising children.

She noted the potent factor of fear, which limits individual and organizational change. "We are tuned toward survival," she said, as slides showed animated cave-people warding off predators. "That means fear impacts us enormously." Because of fear, Bloom said, people tend to repeat the solutions they've used in the past, even when it is clear those solutions no longer work. We act reflexively with retaliation and punishment, instead of with forgiveness and reconciliation. The organizations designed to ameliorate suffering are themselves traumatized, lurching from crisis to crisis; the social safety net is badly frayed.

And then came the good news: an understanding of ACEs unlocks the door to change.

Bloom pointed out that the central concept of ACEs—that the trauma children

suffer will affect them and the world they create—is not new. What is new is the science that now illuminates how that happens—how trauma becomes embedded in biology, how environment and experience re-wire our brains, change our response to stress, increase our susceptibility to disease and alter our gene expression through a process called epigenetics.

“ACE studies are as revolutionary as germ theory was for the 19th century,” Bloom said. “They tell us what is causing the effects we are seeing.”

Being ACE-informed means shifting the relevant question from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?” a question that carries empathy and curiosity rather than distance and judgment. “What happened to you?” suggests that unhealthy behavior has deep and complex roots. Asking “What happened to you?” opens the door to dialogue, reflection and, eventually, healing.

But asking that question, Bloom said, means challenging our most deeply held assumptions about how human beings and human-created systems work. Dismantling those mental models is difficult, she said, because they are largely unconscious; mental models help our brains to quickly organize information, and they inform much of what we feel, think and do. Change inevitably means loss, and that is another reason why people resist it, Bloom said.

Today, she noted, individuals and institutions are often driven by the quest

for money, power or fame. Imagine, she said, a society powered by love, safety, knowledge, trust, healing, freedom, curiosity, participation, connection, fulfillment and meaning, values that are “consistent with keeping children, families and communities alive.”

In framing the message about ACEs to practitioners and the public, Bloom urged NCAR participants to acknowledge both the truth of adversity and the real possibility of healing. “That’s a challenge: how do we stay with the optimism and hope without forgetting the pain and the suffering?” It’s tempting, she said, to gloss over the “big national traumas” of racism, homophobia or the oppression of native people. But only by candidly confronting those traumas and their haunting effects can we heal and move ahead.

“We can’t make transformation happen,” she said. “But we can remove obstacles and create the context for transformative change” in individuals, families, communities and social systems.

In the end, it is up to all of us to determine whether tomorrow’s news is bad or good. Bloom posted a slide of humanity in the balance: a figure leaping across a chasm between a cliff marked “past” and one labeled “future.”

“Understanding trauma is not just about acquiring knowledge,” she said. “It’s about changing the way you view the world.”

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