

BOOK REVIEW

Complex PTSD: From surviving to thriving

Edited by Walker, P.

Lafayette, CA: Azure Coyote Publishing, 2018. 374 pp. ISBN: 1492871842

1 | WHO ARE YOU, AND WHAT DO YOU DO?

I'm Steph Jones, a BACP-registered counsellor and psychotherapist specialising in healing from childhood trauma and creating healthy adult relationships. I work in private practice in Manchester and am a former Director of MIND Manchester, Healthwatch Oldham, and Community Networks 4 Manchester. I'm also a writer, singer, musician, passionate feminist, and loving partner, friend, and cat-owner.

2 | DETAIL A BOOK YOU HAVE BEEN PARTICULARLY IMPACTED BY

The book I'd like to share with you is *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* by Pete Walker. Walker, an experienced therapist, lecturer, and writer—and a survivor of childhood trauma—uses examples from his own life and those of his clients to put forward a comprehensive guide to navigating the complicated path out of childhood abuse and neglect and into a life worth living.

The book invites us to consider how an individual who has grown up in a toxic and dysfunctional environment will have missed out a series of crucial development stages (for example, the art of self-protection) which allows us to better contextualise complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) as an interpersonal attachment disorder.

Walker offers a number of methods and techniques to restore those missing components, and my personal highlight is when he introduces the concept of the *emotional flashback*. Someone with single-event-induced PTSD may experience powerful triggers in relation to the original cause of their trauma (such as the fear of planes flying overhead after returning from a war). Now, if you can imagine substituting those external situations and objects with human beings, of whom there are so many, and with whom there are so many encounters, this will give you an idea of the constant triggering threats perceived by those living with complex (prolonged and/or multiple-event) PTSD.

The real beauty of Walker's work is that it provides the compassionate validation and reassurance necessary for us to understand how our pasts affect the present. It permits us to consider a new reality, so that we may wake from the brainwashed self-blaming distortions of our traumatic early lives.

3 | HOW DID THE BOOK SPEAK TO YOU?

My parents separated when I was six years old, and I was raised by my angry, narcissistic, alcoholic mother who experienced several nervous breakdowns. I would spend the school holidays with my father – a kind but

emotionally unavailable and passive man – and my stepmother, who was cold, bitter, authoritarian, and alienating. Despite going on to achieve a rich, successful, and fulfilling life, something inside never felt quite right. I suffered with bouts of crippling depression and frequent shame episodes, which would appear and disappear seemingly out of the blue.

I spent decades working through these issues in various psychological therapies, yet nothing ever seemed to change. Even completing my Master's degree in psychotherapy did little to shed light on my predicament, and I hopelessly assumed I was broken, defective, and weird.

I'm not sure if I found the book or if the book found me, but, after understanding Walker's concept of emotional flashbacks, the lightbulb went on. I wasn't abnormal after all; I was simply exhibiting a cluster of symptoms—which in context made absolute sense. I had complex PTSD and now, finally, I had hope.

4 | WHAT DOES THE BOOK TELL US ABOUT PSYCHOTHERAPY AS A POLITICAL ACTIVITY?

For me, this book is revolutionary and stands in opposition to the psychiatric professions, which have sought to keep Complex PTSD out of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) despite its recognition by the World Health Organisation's *International Classification of Diseases* (WHO, 2018). It has been widely suggested that the introduction of this disorder would in fact reduce the current DSM (5th edition) to the size of the average pamphlet, which may go some way towards explaining such financial and political resistance.

The book provides a comprehensive reading list, and directs us to other world-leaders in the field of childhood trauma including Bessel Van der Kolk – best-selling author of *The Body Keeps the Score*. Van der Kolk (2015) proposes a radical paradigm shift in the way we think about traumatisation, describing how trauma has nothing to do with cognition but is in fact the body resetting itself to interpret the world as a dangerous place. This is a direct challenge (and therefore threat) to the current manualised-approach monopoly, which tends to hold the individual accountable for their own distress caused by “unhelpful thinking.” Walker reminds us that childhood trauma isn't something that just happens to us, but something we need to spend a lifetime unlearning. There are no quick fixes in this book, which paradoxically provides enormous reassurance—particularly if you've previously attempted (and felt that you've failed) multiple therapeutic interventions.

For those already struggling with a history of invalidation, the political debate may indeed mirror a parallel process. However, the book charges us with a sense of fresh optimism and renewal. By writing a book about an “unofficial disorder,” Walker contributes to the knowledge base and raises awareness of C-PTSD in the public domain. We are reminded that things can and do change by people power—after all, it was only in 1980 that the American Psychiatric Association officially chose to recognise PTSD.

5 | WHY MIGHT OTHERS READ THE BOOK?

Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving has not only altered the course of my own recovery but has completely transformed the scope of my professional life and my offer to my clients. I learned more about the long-lasting effects of abandonment and rejection on the child's developing psyche from this book than I did in all my years of training. I would highly recommend this text as core reading for trainees.

The book is a lifeline, not simply as a self-help book but as a self-illuminating tool. I can't count the number of clients who have practically bounced through my doors after picking up this recommendation as if finding a needle in a haystack. Of course, the knowledge itself isn't a cure (though the tools certainly help) but the first step to tackling a problem is knowing what you're dealing with in the first place.

Perhaps my favourite aspect of the book is how it communicates its message with such warmth, compassion, healing, relatability, and humour. Walker isn't writing as a cold, clinical professional, he practically reaches through the pages cheering us all on: "It's OK! You're not alone! We've got this!"

Stephanie Jones

Stockport, UK

Email: stephanie_k_jones@hotmail.com

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Steph Jones is a person-centred and experiential counsellor and psychotherapist, writer, trainer, and mental health campaigner supporting individuals and couples at her private practice in Greater Manchester, Cheshire. Steph is former Director of Mind Manchester (mental health charity), Healthwatch Oldham, Community Networks for Manchester, and previously set up and managed a bereavement service at a local hospice. Prior to training Steph worked as a senior project manager, journalist and radio broadcaster. She may be contacted by emailing stephanie_k_jones@hotmail.com or visiting www.stephjonescounselling.co.uk.