

Healing: Why We Don't and How We Can

■ Caroline Myss



So many people in the process of healing are, at the same time, feeling stuck. They are striving to confront their painful experiences, valiantly working to bring meaning to past traumas, and exercising compassionate understanding of others who share their wounds. But they are still not healing. Rather, they have redefined their lives around their wounds and the process of accepting them.

When we define ourselves in this way—what I call “woundology”—we lose our physical and spiritual energy, and open ourselves to the risk of illness. We are not meant to stay wounded. We are supposed to move through our tragedies and challenges and to help others move through theirs. By remaining stuck in the power of our wounds, we block our own transformation. We overlook the greater gifts inherent in our wounds—the strength to overcome them and the lessons we are meant to receive through them. Wounds teach us to become passionate and wise.

THE MYTHS

There are five central myths that make healing nearly impossible. Each supports the consciousness of woundology. These beliefs are so powerful that they sometimes seem to be stronger than our beliefs about the possibility of healing.

The way to break the controlling force of a myth is to recognize that you personally believe it and that while you may share this belief with others, it is not necessarily a fact. Then, you need to work consciously to detach yourself from its influence. No myth releases itself from the psyche without a fight, yet if you are intent on genuine healing, you must carry on that fight and develop thought forms to supplant these myths and support your health.

MYTH 1: My life is defined by my wound.

It is virtually impossible not to be influenced by a personal history of emotional or psychological wounds. Both literally and symbolically, what we experience permeates

our bodies. Your biography is your biology.

Many people come to believe, however, that their lives are only a compilation of psychological wounds that they feel they can do little to heal. They project their past experience onto everything that has since come into their lives. Although this state of mind is sad, self-limiting and defeatist, some people derive great power from maintaining it because it gives them permission to lead a life of limited responsibility. It allows them to lean on others for assistance, playing on their guilt to keep that assistance coming.

As the years go by, and you become accustomed to this kind of power and self-protection, it is more and more difficult to change. The only way to release the grip of this myth is to take more responsibility for the quality of your life. Instead of wishing that you weighed 50 pounds less, start walking and change your diet, even if you walk just a mile and day and eliminate only a few high-fat foods. When you find yourself saying or thinking, “I could have been a _____, but my wounded past prevented me from achieving it,” then take steps to fulfill that impossible goal.

Questions for Self-Examination:

1. Do you make excuses for why you're not doing more positive things with your life?
2. Do you compare your history of wounds with others? If so, why?
3. If you feel more wounded than someone else, does that make you feel empowered?

MYTH 2: Being healthy means being alone.

For many people, the fear of independence—and by extension, of being alone—lies at the core of their inability to heal. Moreover, they believe that once they are healed they will always be healed and that emotional and psychological support will evaporate.

The truth is that whether we are healed or are in the process of healing, we will always need loving friends and family;

a community based not just on wounds or neediness but also on shared interests and emotional nurturing.

The requirements for healing are tough; they may demand that you let go of old friends. If so, keep in mind the cyclical nature of life. Loneliness and friendship can each play a role in your healing at different times.

Questions for Self-Examination

1. Are you afraid that if you heal, your support group will abandon you or be less sympathetic to you?
2. When you picture yourself as healed, are you the only one in the room?
3. Do you see emotional wounds as a means of bonding with another, and does healing mean having to separate from that person?

MYTH 3: Feeling pain means being destroyed by pain.

Often pain signals the presence of illness, either emotional or physical. But pain is also a teacher, pointing to an area that is begging for repair. Drugging pain can mislead us into thinking we are healing when we are not. Instead of immediately medicating ourselves, we should examine why we have a pain or a pattern of physical aches and pains.

One way is to be by studying yourself. Pay attention to how many thoughts and attitudes you hold each day that are painful. Write them down so that you can see them clearly and can recognize the physical damage they can do to your body. You may come to realize that you dwell on painful images of yourself or on pain-filled beliefs about life. You may even realize that you are, at your core, a pessimist. Or you may come to recognize that it is not your pain that you are carrying but the grief of others whom you want to protect. It may even become possible for you to understand pain as a spiritual challenge that has come into your life as a means of making your state of mind stronger than you ever could have imagined.

Healing: Why We Don't and How We Can

Questions for

Self-Examination:

1. Do you think of pain as always being an enemy?
2. Have you ever learned anything from physical pain? If so, what?
3. To cope with pain, are you more likely to take medication or use meditation or another inner discipline?
4. Have you ever been addicted to pain medication or sleeping pills?

MYTH 4: Illness is the result of negativity.

Our thoughts powerfully influence the health of our minds and bodies, and delving into our inner selves is essential to the healing process. Yet negative patterns are not always at the root of illness, and a failure to heal should not always be blamed on negative past experiences or on negative beliefs buried deep in the unconscious mind.

Sometimes illness is the result of a complex of causes, and it can be futile to try to reduce it to a single factor. Healing would be better served by investigating our past for positive patterns as well as negative ones.

Questions for

Self-Examination:

1. Are you always searching for what you did to deserve your illness?
2. Do you believe that you won't be able to heal until you uncover what you did wrong?
3. Do you find yourself dwelling on past negative experiences, believing that this actually enhances your healing?

MYTH 5: True change is impossible.

No one likes to change. Yet the truth is, healing and change are the same thing. They are composed of the same energy, and we cannot heal without first investigating what behavioral patterns and attitudes we need to alter. Once those characteristics are identified, we have to do something about them. And action brings about change.

To work change into the depths of our nature, we need to come to grips with those characteristics within us that we have avoided. We are often completely unaware of parts of our personalities, either because we do not want to recognize them or because we have never paid attention to our shadow side.

Questions for

Self-Examination:

1. Do you think about change more than you act to bring it about?
2. Do you always imagine that change will be troublesome and depressing rather than exciting?
3. Do you think of change as something that will make your life feel chaotic?

IGNITING THE HEALING FIRE

It's one thing to understand intellectually the steps you need to take to heal. It's quite another to understand what you need to do on an emotional level. To ignite the healing fire, you need to believe something with your heart. The heart holds the catalyst that causes the rest of the body-mind to heal.

Here are 12 ways to maximize your healing potential:

1. Learn to say no.

The most important thing you can do for yourself in a crisis situation is to learn to manage your time. You have to put yourself first. Whether you're healthy or trying to heal, ask yourself: Is this what I want to put my time into right now? Whenever you find yourself in a life crisis, ask the following questions:

- A) Who are the most important people in my life?
- B) Am I investing my time in the people and things that matter most to me, both for healing and for living a meaningful life?
- C) If not, what am I willing to do about that?

You may need to cut down on the time you spend with people whose orientation and behavior no longer fit in with your need to heal. Using time wisely also means leaving empty space for yourself, time to do nothing so that you allow new ideas and feelings to come to the surface. An illness, a trauma, or a life crisis can become an opportunity to explore life at a slower pace.

2. Change course immediately.

People often tell me that until they can figure out what treatment is best for them, they feel safer not doing anything. I take that to mean that they are not ready to make the necessary changes in their lives. Healing is a "present time" challenge. Postponing the

decision to shift gears is dangerous. It is much wiser—and safer—to start anywhere than to do nothing. Every positive choice activates a new current of energy in your life. A change does not have to be big to be effective: Introducing a shift in your nutrition or adding an exercise regime is a good beginning.

3. Practice cyclic thinking.

The perception that time and life are linear handicaps the healing process. Example: "If this treatment does not help within a month, then it's not working, and I'm not healing." Healing is, above all, a learning experience, and one of its biggest lessons is that life is characterized by impermanence and flux. If you can learn to accept change with equanimity, you will have mastered a lot more than just an illness.

Cyclic thinking is also one of the most effective means of learning to forgive. Forgiveness frees up the energy for necessary healing. Part of the problem with the victim mentality is that it overlooks the ways in which we ourselves perpetuate what was done to us.

The next time you are caught up in angry thoughts about a past injury, try this exercise: Look closely at your actions over the past week and see if you are committing the same kind of injustice or abuse that you have suffered. You may feel, for instance, that during your childhood, you were wrongly judged and that this judgment has influenced how people think of you today. When you start to feel the weight of that memory, look at whether you have judged someone else in a similar fashion. You need to both forgive yourself for making the judgment and forgive the person who judged you unfairly all those years ago.

3. Have realistic goals for yourself.

Just as no one can train to run a marathon in one day, living a healthy life or healing an illness requires that you practice regularly whatever disciplines you adopt, whether they are medical treatments, nutritional changes, an exercise regimen, visualizations, or meditation.

Many new fears may emerge following the diagnosis of an illness, or when you experience a setback or tragedy in your life. You need to be patient with yourself. If you feel depressed or anxious, step back and see

Healing: Why We Don't and How We Can

when and in what context those feelings appear. Or you can try this Sufi exercise, called “A Mile from Baghdad.”

Close your eyes and see yourself walking down a lonely stretch of desert road that seems to go on forever. Feel the sun beating down, the hot sand beneath your feet, an overpowering thirst and fatigue. Let yourself experience both the aridity of the place and your own loneliness and desperation. Then find an outcropping of rock beside the road and settle down for the night. Watch the sun set, and feel the cool night air.

Now leave the rock formation and look around. In the distance you see twinkling lights, and you begin to hear the soft strains of music. You realize there is a city filled with people quite close by. You believed you were in the middle of a barren desert, but you were really only a mile from Baghdad. Let the realization sink in that relief is near at hand and you have only a short way to walk. As you relax in that knowledge, say a brief prayer of thanksgiving.

If you do not notice any change in your body in the first month of your effort to heal, it does not mean that changes are not happening. They may be occurring at an energetic level and will eventually cause positive mental, spiritual, and even physical changes. You may be a lot closer to your goal than you realize.

5. Develop your will power.

Desiring to heal is not the same as having the will to heal. You need to train your mind and emotions to respond to the positive commands you create. And these positive thoughts must become the dominant perceptions with which your mind and emotions connect. Doing a thirty-minute visualization once or twice a day and then returning to fear-filled thoughts the rest of the day negates the influence of your positive work.

Keeping your focus in a positive direction takes practice. You do not need to develop your focus as completely as a meditation master, but you do need to achieve a working relationship with your inner resources so you can quickly eclipse a negative thought with a positive one. The use of a mantra—a word or phrase you

repeat silently to yourself—is very effective in learning to focus.

Another way of learning to control your mind and emotions is to work with the distractions in your everyday life. Suppose you become irritated while waiting in traffic. This is a perfect situation in which to practice commanding your energy to remain within your body instead of leaking out.

6. Healing is not a quest to solve your mysteries but to learn how to live within them.

Illness remains one of the great mysteries of life. You may wonder if your disease is tied to your traumatic marriage, or your childhood, or toxins in the environment. Get past the questions. The purpose of the mysteries in our lives may well be to lead us out of our dependence on human reasoning into acceptance that Divine intelligence is in control.

Practice placing your questions in the hands of the Divine. Visualize God or Buddha or Mary or the Tao pulling your questions away from you and your energy. Feel yourself freed from concern and doubt and filled with a gentle healing glow that suffuses every part of your body and mind.

7. Cultivate grace.

The spirit needs nourishment to heal, just as the mind and body do. Build up the courage to act by inspiring yourself with the stories and wisdom of those who have changed their lives forever by taking action, through entering the dark night of the soul fearlessly. Sample the wisdom of unfamiliar traditions: Explore the Kabbalah; entertain yourself with Sufi parables; study the sermons of the Buddha or the simple teachings of the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh; examine the mystical writings of the Christian Desert Fathers or the text of the Upanishads.

As you absorb truths and stories that nourish the spirit, you will feel a release of energy in you. This energy can only be called “grace”. It is a vibrational force of such power that it can lift you for an instant out of your immediate circumstances and fill you with the perception that there is nothing you cannot handle.

In case you think that miracles don't happen to ordinary people, let me tell you a

story that happened to me. Satya Sai Baba is a living saint in India who is said, among other things, to be able to manifest objects, from holy ashes to precious stones, out of thin air. This ability is known in Sanskrit as vibhuti—“revelation” or “power.” A few years ago I was having trouble keeping my balance. No matter what I did, this condition kept getting worse, so as a last resort before I went to sleep, I said a prayer to Sai Baba: “I need some vibhuti, and I need it now. I'm in bad trouble.”

The next morning I received a package from an acquaintance in Copenhagen whom I hadn't heard from in five years; inside was a small tube filled with ashes, with a label that read, “To Caroline Myss from Satya Sai Baba.” Since the mail from Denmark usually takes several days, the answer to my prayer must have been on the way to me before I uttered the words. Within hours of receiving the vibhuti, my balance returned and I have never had the problem again.

Every situation in your life has been created with the energy of grace. Pay attention to the ordinary moments as much as to the extraordinary ones and recognize that behind the scenes of those events is the energy of the Divine.

8. Use sacred imagery.

Whether you use visualization or actual objects, sacred imagery is a profound way to feel a connection with the heavens. If you have a favorite representation of the Divine, a personal saint, or a revered spiritual teacher, keep it with you. Although you can't carry around your altar or sacred space, you can carry a small image, reminding you that you are never truly alone.

9. Learn something new every day.

Learning activates passion, and passion is power—in fact it is one of the strongest forms of energy that we can generate within our body. Passion is a connection to life itself, giving us a reason to want to see tomorrow.

Like meditation, developing and pursuing a passion is its own reward, but it can also generate many valuable side effects. We don't know where our passions will take us or what subsidiary benefits may accrue from following our hearts and our bliss.

Healing: Why We Don't and How We Can

10. Create a new vocabulary for yourself.

Although there is no harm in expressing the pain and fear that illness brings into your life, you want to avoid falling into the pit of constantly “speaking pain.” Toward that end, create a new vocabulary for yourself that describes your condition in optimistic, healing, or spiritual terms. One woman I know referred to her illness as a friend “who has come to teach me great truths.”

Calling her illness a friend helped her lessen the fear of her situation and helped her feel she could communicate with her illness; she also felt it would leave her when their time together was complete. Once healed, she actually held a ritual saying farewell to her friend—a fine antidote to lingering woundology.

11. Review daily where you have plugged in your energy circuits.

Pay attention to any feeling that energy is leaving your body and assess why and where it is going. If your energy attaches itself to a target that is draining your energy, tell yourself to detach. Learn to sense the flow of energy into and out of your body. You already know the sensation of energy leaving your body when you are angry or frightened—you feel instantly weakened, or develop a headache or backache. Any physical symptom is a signal that you are losing energy.

As a preemptive action, direct your energy circuits each day into positive sources that can help you feel filled with power and light. One person I know visualizes his circuits connecting to the statues of Jesus and Mary that stand in the church he attends. Other people I know visualize their energy circuits connected to the sun or other aspects of nature.

12. Practice gratitude whenever you feel overwhelmed.

Feeling appreciative makes life thrive in our systems. Make gratitude a practice. Do not look for only the large and obvious reasons to be grateful. Learn to see your life through a wide-angle lens that includes every detail.

In your effort to appreciate all that is in your life, include yourself. Spoil yourself

with gifts of time—time to know yourself better and to appreciate those who are part of your life. Indulge yourself in ways you have always wanted to. Wander off your beaten path.

Few obstacles that we encounter are life-threatening, but disease is. And psychologically and spiritually devastating experiences such as the loss of a child or a painful divorce can also be dangerous; the anguish they generate can lead to a large-scale physical breakdown or the risk of suicide. Be committed to your effort to return to mental and physical health. Don't let the limitations that you experience today influence what you may experience tomorrow.

All things are possible, and heaven is always listening.