

Dr Kerstin Stellermann-Strehlow

From a neurobiological point of view, Dr. Kerstin Stellermann-Strehlow explored the more “biological” sense of what trauma is. She started by reminding the audience about the origins of the term “trauma”, which as a “wound” – following the etymology of the word in Greek. Having that idea in mind, there are at least three things that happen when someone experiences trauma or is “wounded”:

1. There is a vital discrepancy of a threatening situation and the individual coping mechanism (the person or group does not know how to react and process);
2. It leaves the feeling of helplessness and un-protectiveness;
3. It causes a long term shattering of the understanding of self and the world.

In its essence, a trauma originates in a stressful event that cannot be dealt with properly. When such a stressful event occurs, the normal biological reactions include: “fight” (confront the situation) or “flight” (escape the situation). The individual ways of responding depend on how others might respond to the same phenomenon: stressful situations are often a communal experience, and people try to look to others in searching for references for one’s own action, translating the “biological response” to a “socially influenced” one.

These responses are “normal”, but whenever one is incapable of performing them, a feeling of helplessness starts growing and leads to “freezing”. This “freezing” could create – when sustained for too long - neurobiological consequences: when there is a stressful event, the memory and high-cognitive functions can be affected in the long run. This is the reason why trauma becomes an experience that does not allow the person to remember it right and/or does not allow them to interpret and give different meanings to what has happened (high-cognitive function).

So, even though not all stressful situations lead to trauma – they could even be beneficial to a certain extent, in the sense that they may actually give or train us in having more and more resources to respond to stress - deep experiences or sustained levels of stress (without a proper intervention) may cause damage in the neurological functions, and then a certain disposition or vulnerability could be passed on genetically (trans-generational trauma).

Intervention or trauma healing depend on both the resources a person (or group) has – in terms of dealing with stress - and the way in which the person is accompanied by others. Each person has sets of resources (material or non-material) and/or mechanisms to deal with the stressful situations, and it is important to acknowledge and activate them, which may help giving different or new meaning to what has happened.

In terms of accompaniment, the question of empathy (feeling with people; connecting with people) instead of sympathy (superficial connection) may be the big difference

between a useful and helpful process of accompaniment and a non-helpful and harmful one.