



UNDERSTANDING A HEALING CRISIS

Jon Burras



As you grow and pass in and out of periods in your life you may often feel confused and off-center. Feeling disoriented or erratic may become commonplace. Strange pains may pop up throughout your body. Your emotions may fluctuate from highs to lows. Your normal way of coping with your world might not seem to be working anymore. You may be experiencing a healing crisis.

A healing crisis is a period in our lives that follows a sudden or gradual influx of stimulation. This could be on a physical, emotional, or relationship level of your life. This stimulation, whether invited or by chance, may cause us to dismantle some layers of normal functioning behavior.

A healing crisis, while not necessarily a pleasurable experience, (and often quite painful), is a worthwhile event in our lives in the long term. The term “growing pains” might be another phrase that could be used to describe a healing crisis.

A single sudden and traumatic event could send you into a healing crisis. For instance, a sudden death of a very close friend or relative could be the catalyst that sends you into a healing crisis. You sob uncontrollably every minute of the day. It hurts your body to cry this intensely. You feel as if the tears will never stop. Your normal life is usually one of controlled and measured emotional responses to situations. Now you are over the edge and are totally out of control. Others describe you as having “lost control”, or of having a “break down”. In practical terms you are more likely “breaking through” a layer that has held you intact for quite some time.

While it may hurt, it also feels quite refreshing to let the tears go. You feel cleansed. All the emotions that seem to have been bottled up inside are now being flushed outward. You may feel a renewed sense of freedom.

One single event, while quite painful to go through, has pushed you into a healing crisis. You are unsure of how to act in the world. You are constantly reminded of how important it is to stay in control at all times, yet it feels so good to let go. You may experience a sense of chaos for a while before you can integrate this new experience.

Single events do push us into a healing crisis. Repetitive stimulation can also affect us in the same manner. Many dedicated students of yoga may unknowingly enter in and out of the healing crisis with a consistent practice. With each pose and each daily practice a student of yoga begins to unravel the layers of physical and emotional holding within the body. This could be the equivalent of peeling away the many layers of an onion. As the outer layers unfold the next layer presents itself to us as an untold story. We may have been accustomed to experiencing our world from a surface layer when we are thrust into relating from a deeper layer. This new layer has a different story to teach us as new information is revealed.

All of a sudden your shoulders might begin to feel painful or tight. Your hips cry out in the night when lying on your side. Even your normal high levels of energy seem to have dropped.

At first you think that you are crazy or sick with some horrible disease. You may begin to wonder if you are imagining this pain. Shame and guilt overtake you as you feel weak for having pain or do not have the same amount of energy as normal.

When going through a healing crisis it is important to dispel the myth that “healing means always feeling better”. You may feel worse before you actually begin to feel better. This could last for days or even months as your body readjusts itself.

The Wounding Experience

In order to better understand what happens in a healing crisis it may be important to understand how a wounding crisis affects our body. A wounding experience is a physical or emotional memory stored within the body. A wounding crisis occurs either in a sudden blow or over an extended period of time and with repetitive movements. The three primary forces that help to create a wounding crisis are **stress, repression, and physical trauma**.

Stress is a force in our lives that is initiated when we do not feel safe. Stress is primarily an emotional experience. When we are afraid our body reacts into what is called the **Fight or Flight Response**. This is a very primitive mechanism designed to keep us alive. Our muscles hold on in a predetermined pattern, perhaps around the jaw, eyes, or in the back of the neck. Over time and with repeated activation these same muscles tend to harden and bond together. In a way, the layers of our tissues, just like the layers of the onion, are now glued together.

Repression is another primary force in our lives that leads to a wounding crisis. Repression occurs when we use our own muscles to hold back the energy of our emotions. We damn ourselves up with our own musculature system. Once again, over time and with repetitive behavior, the layers

of muscles tend to harden and bond together. Those agonizing tears at the death of a close friend or relative may be ripping apart years of repression stored within your muscles.

Physical trauma is the third primary force involved in a wounding crisis. This can be the result of accidents, falls, car crashes, or even sports injuries. For instance, when you fall in a skiing accident but continue to roll with your body there is less chance that your body will store the trauma. The energy of impact most likely has been dissipated as you roll. But the result of a head on crash with a stationary tree while skiing could be stored within your body. There is no ground to absorb the impact so the only place the energy can go is into your own body.

A single physical trauma is not the only way. Smaller, repetitive traumas could add up over time. The act of stubbing the same toe on the bedpost every morning could be equivalent to one large kick against a wall. This is just like many small strikes with a small hammer against the wall could be the equivalent of a single blow with a much heavier sledgehammer. The energy of every blow that your body receives over time will lodge within your body.

Due to the forces of stress, repression, or physical trauma a wounding crisis may result. Under our current belief system we most likely will hold on tightly when injured or feel the affects of stress. We keep our muscles tight and the area immobilized. This locks the trauma into our body.

After a while the brain stops sending nerve impulses to this area. The areas that we hold onto tightly begin to numb out or lose sensation. We lose our ability to feel the memory stored here because we have desensitized the area. This does not necessarily mean that we are better because we no longer feel pain. Much of the time it means that we have stopped moving an area and it has lost sensation. Over time the layers of muscles and soft tissue remain frozen and immobilized and a layer of “armor” forms. This is how an injury sight hardens like layers of an onion.

Imagine a tree that is healthy and alive. You decide to take your ax and strike the tree to make a wound. This wound will rarely go away. Years later, when you return to view the same tree, you may notice how it has grown. The tree is much larger now but the area that you impacted years before will still be there. The tree may have built up layers around this wound to close the wound and protect it. But the wound will most noticeably be there. Our bodies are just like this tree when it comes to holding onto wounding experiences.

An emotional wounding is very similar. If you experienced a significant traumatic event, either one time or repeatedly, and you did not release it as soon as possible after the event had ended, then this wound may be stored in your body. Armor, like the growth of the tree, could have grown

around the wound. This armor could be in the form of excess weight, hardened muscles and soft tissue, or behavioral armor of constant busyness to avoid feeling.

Being in war could be such an event. A rape or assault incident could still be lodged within your body. Even what would seem like normal family behavior, like being picked on constantly or emotional abuse, could be stored in your body, surrounded by layers of armoring. This armoring of our tissues, either physical or energetic armor, becomes like the excess bark growing around the wound in the tree. Anyone looking could very easily see the wound. The wound has not gone away. It has only been frozen in place.

Unpeeling the Body's Onion

The healing crisis occurs when we begin to strip away layers of our own armor. This could happen in a single traumatic event or through normal growth oriented work. A regular yoga practice or other healing oriented modalities could be examples of such growth work. Bodywork, process work, or spiritual engagement could also lead one into a healing crisis. Any practice, whether, physical, emotional, or spiritual, that begins to unravel the layers of holding could lead one into a healing crisis.

A healing crisis might be equated to the analogy of a tall radio antenna. The antenna might stand one thousand feet tall and be supported by four long guy wires to keep it upright. But if you were to remove two of the four wires one might have to tighten the other two wires up even more in order to keep the antenna standing in the stiff wind.



The first stage of a healing crisis is to come out of numbness and bring sensation and emotion back to the body. These sensations are not necessarily the problem, only a manifestation of a deeper issue. Many people become alarmed when the sensations arise. Coming out of numbness into sensation is the first step in healing.

Unfortunately, most medical professionals and professional therapists are not trained in how to understand the healing crisis. The medical establishment wishes to categorize a healing crisis as a “breakdown”, or disease. They equate being in control at all times as the normal model for health and loss of control is equal to disease.

Most people, when turning to medical professionals for help, are either hospitalized or medicated in order to suppress the symptoms. While this may help one to lessen the intensity of the experience and bring one back to normal- control- it does very little to actually help one through the healing crisis.

Many people live life numb and avoid feeling and sensation at all costs. They become alarmed when strong sensations and emotions begin to emerge. When entering into a healing crisis many of these sensations are not pleasant and can be very painful.

Pain, pressure, and lack of coordination are some common complaints when experiencing a healing crisis. Other symptoms may include frequent urination, heavy sweating, depression, explosive anger, or even vomiting. The body during these times tends to enter into a state of chaos. Extreme tiredness is another common side effect. Some people even report a sense of giddiness or silliness that does not stop.

Terry was a client of mine. We had been working together for a while doing bodywork and body mind therapy. We worked in a bodywork session to release the energy up her spine. I call this a *kundalini massage*. Terry found this to be a very profound experience.

Terry had always had difficulty sleeping. She would lay awake in bed until late at night only to awaken early in the morning. Sleep was not refreshing for her. After the *kundalini massage* Terry fell asleep that night and did not wake up for two straight days. She had finally relaxed and let go. Her mind and body were exhausted and she went into a mini-coma. She did not wake up to go to the bathroom or hear the telephone ringing during this time. She was fast asleep for 36 straight hours.

A healing crisis is a time for the body to come back into balance. Donald Epstein writes in *Healing Myths Healing Magic*, “Once again, disease is not a mistake of a stupid body; it is the body’s attempt to reorganize its energy systems to allow for a greater exchange of information and energy and thus a greater expression of consciousness.”

Through our chaos and cloudy thinking our body dynamics are trying to reorganize. Somehow we have become removed from nature’s natural rhythm and our body is attempting to come back to balance. It often seems that the farther we are from the flow of nature the more

strongly our body attempts to bring us back into balance. The more out of touch we seem to be with our emotions and our inner experiences the more profoundly we seem to experience a healing crisis.

While attempting to bring the body back to balance a healing crisis does not necessarily create new problems for the body but releases the issues that are lying dormant deep below the surface. Jim was another client of mine. I gave Jim a session of *Intuitive Connective Tissue Bodywork* to help straighten out his kyphotic spine. The session went very well and Jim received tremendous results.

The next day Jim could barely get out of bed. The gout that Jim had been carrying for many years had flared up. The bodywork session did not give Jim gout; it only released the gout from deep below the surface. Hard muscles had kept the gout in check.

Janice was another client of mine. She had another adverse reaction to growth work. We had been working together for about a year using bodywork and process work. She was a breast cancer survivor. After about a year of intense work Janice ended up in the hospital with a severe abdominal blockage. This had never happened to her before. The years worth of work did not cause Janice's colon to become blocked. The work only released layers of hardened tissue that were holding the colon in place. The colon reacted in a spasm when enough tissue had been released. After a few very painful days in the hospital she resumed her healing work.

We often think about a healing crisis as a time when we are diagnosed with a major life-threatening disease and we finally get the message that we have not done a good job taking care of ourselves. But you do not have to have a life-threatening illness to experience a healing crisis. Any single event or repetitive stimulation could trigger a healing crisis. Drug trips have been known to send people off on a healing crisis. So could childbirth, war, or a sudden shift in a relationship or job.

The following three examples are of individuals who experienced a healing crisis. The first happened through a kundalini experience. The second was initiated through a professional therapy program. The third used yoga as a tool to initiate her into her healing crisis.

Jason was a healthy and athletic twenty-nine year old man. He prided himself on his strength and his athletic ability. Jason decided he wanted to try something different and went away for a month on a retreat with a focus group. He began to learn new things about himself. He started to become introspective.

Halfway through his month long exploration the group went through a three day intensive exchange. Tools to release anger were explored. Communication skills were taught. The group

experienced a significant amount of bonding. At this point everyone was supposed to get up on a small stage in front of the group and perform a small “piece” of something- a song, poem, a dance. It was late in the night. Everyone was tired.

Jason sat in his chair shaking. He feared more than anything else in the world to have to get up on stage and perform. This was his worst nightmare. His body was sweating profusely. He wanted to run. Finally the group leader called on Jason. It was his turn. He froze in terror. He could not control his body from shaking. His armor was peeling off. He trembled at the thought of having to get up on stage. He felt nauseous. The leader laid Jason on the floor. The group surrounded him in support.

At this point Jason was unable to control anything about him. His body shook violently. It felt like he was a snake peeling away a layer of skin. He was experiencing a kundalini experience. Energy was passing through him. He was out of control, something that he did not do often. He could not pull himself back together if he wanted to. This was much bigger than him. It felt like a locomotive crawling up his spine.

After some time Jason emerged from his healing crisis feeling free and open. He felt like he had been reborn. There was no fear or pain in his body what so ever. He felt at peace. Unable to explain his experience he began his search to learn more about what had happened.

The kundalini experience can be another form of a healing crisis. This could last for minutes or for months. It is through experiences like this that we often feel crazy. But we are not crazy. We are really entering into a spiritual emergence at this time. Many times our transpersonal experiences lead us into a healing crisis.

When deliberately confronting a particular issue in our lives repetitive professional help can also initiate a healing crisis. When we challenge ourselves to grow we deliberately challenge our beliefs and defense mechanisms. Through professionally guided work we can go into the fear and the pain that has been holding us back for some time.

Debbie was working with a private therapist on an issue of sexual abuse. When she was thirteen Debbie was raped by the husband of the family that she was baby-sitting. She was now in her early thirties. She and her therapist agreed that they she should also be working with a body mind therapist to help her move the trauma out of her body.

During her body mind therapy Debbie learned to use her legs and her arms, symbolically pushing her attacker away. She could not do this as a thirteen year old. This gave her a sense of

reclaiming her power. She learned to scream and use her voice. Learning to say “No” was also an important step.

After several body mind sessions Debbie began to lose control. She shook violently in the night. She could not stop crying throughout the day. She was restless and irritable. She could not eat. Debbie was in a healing crisis. She found it very difficult to function throughout the day. Going to work was a challenge. Just leaving the house seemed like too much. Her body was releasing an old memory and bringing her back to balance. This healing crisis lasted for several weeks.

The third example comes from Sharon and her yoga practice. Sharon had been studying yoga diligently for several years. As a yoga teacher as well I monitored her progress regularly. One day while on retreat we were working with backbends. Sharon went up into the wheel pose, a significant back bend. I assisted her by having her grab my ankles and extend her arms out. I encouraged her to breath deeply from her belly.

Sharon lowered herself down shaking and sweating. We paused for a few moments. Then we did the pose two more times. Each time Sharon went deeper into the pose. Each time she broke through a layer of fear in her body.

Sharon reported a shaking for several days. But she also said that she had never felt freer. Her whole personality had changed. The fear that had held her back was now gone. She had moved through a healing crisis.

When we experience a healing crisis we may feel disoriented. We may not feel safe going out of the house or traveling. In fact certain areas of our own home may not feel safe. We may want to hide in bed all day long or find a closet to sit in to collect our thoughts.

Our body is an open system. Our body can be compared to a microenvironment in nature. Rivers feed water into wetlands. It is here that the water is purified and cleaned by plants that feed on pollutants and algae. The water then enters the ocean where it is evaporated and turned into rain. The rain falls and fills lakes, which feed back into rivers and start the cycle all over again.

Our body is very similar. We were meant to have everything flow through us, from our waste products to our energy flow. But many times something is blocking this flow and release from of us. We are like a river that has become damned up with silt. We became plugged up or frozen somewhere along our journey. A healing crisis attempts to unblock that which is blocked and return us back to our natural flow.

Donald Epstein writes in *Healing Myths Healing Magic*, “Healing occurs the instant a physical or mechanical obstruction is removed, or the instant we express our inner wisdom. Healing

occurs the instant that parts of our body begin to share their stories with one another. Healing occurs the moment we liberate blocked energy that is stored in different areas of our body, or when our breath becomes more easy and natural.”

A healing crisis attempts to put us back at ease. This is nature’s way of bringing us back to balance. While sometimes scary and chaotic a healing crisis is a worthwhile event to go through. Blocking the event from happening only makes matters worse.

When asked how long a spiritual emergency might last Emma Bragdon writes in *The Call of Spiritual Emergency*, “There is no answer to this. It depends on what kind of patterns of spiritual emergence people are experiencing. If the experience is physically very intense, it will end when the body gets tired of the intensity. Likewise, if it is very emotional, the crisis will let up when the body tires of catharsis. All life pulsates-expands and contracts. A contraction cycle will inevitably follow an expansion. An expansion will inevitably follow a contraction.”

Recognizing a healing crisis in yourself or others is the first step in working through it. No, you are not crazy. Give it a name. Say to yourself, “ I am experiencing a healing crisis as my body is attempting to come back to balance.” Honor this place.

A healing crisis is nature’s way to help us heal old wounds. We are as much a part of nature as the rivers and plants. Nature will clear off old brush in a forest and sprout new seeds by igniting a brush fire with a lightning strike. We are no different. Nature creates a firestorm in us to bring us back into harmony. Allow nature to be your guide.

How to Handle a Healing Crisis?

1. Seek support. It is very difficult to handle any crisis alone, especially a healing crisis. You may feel disoriented and confused. Decision-making may not come easy. Find support with loved ones or family. Rely on your intimate friends to take care of you. If you do not have many close friends who can or are willing to support you then seek out a professional. A professional therapist, especially one oriented to transpersonal issues would be very helpful. Contacting SEN, (The Spiritual Emergence Network) is also a good referral resource. (415-648-2610)
2. Ask for help. It is almost impossible to take care of yourself in the same manner when experiencing a healing crisis. Financially, emotionally, and logistically, a healing crisis takes its toll on us. In more nature based communities the village pulls together when someone is in any sort of crisis. Find your village and have the courage to ask for help.

3. Write down your needs. You may need to spend more time alone from friends and loved ones. This could threaten a partner in a relationship. You may need more sleep. You may need to work less or not at all. You may need help taking care of the children while you spend some time working through your crisis.
4. Surrender to the experience. Fighting the healing crisis will only suppress it. You may continue to try to do the same amount of things as you are accustomed to doing only to find yourself being dragged down. It requires a significant amount of energy to work through a healing crisis. This may feel like having another job. You may have to lighten your load for a while or reprioritize your life for now. Yoga students might continue their movement but slow down a bit and not work so hard during this time.
5. Ground yourself. Be out in nature. Nature is a wonderful healer and teacher. Avoid over stimulation and find your solitude in nature. Try not to use food or other addictions to suppress these new feelings and sensations. Try to eat a nature-based diet.
6. Find a sanctuary. Where is a safe place to be? Do you need to be alone or with others? Is your bed or another safe place the right sanctuary for you? Some people even find themselves sitting in a closet to gain perspective.
7. Receive massages and bodywork. Allow yourself to be comforted. Significant physical and emotional pain might be coming up for you. Take time to nurture yourself. For many the act of being touched helps us come back to relaxation and feelings of safety.
8. Keep moving. Depression sets in when the energy of emotion does not flow out of us. Walking, hiking, tai chi, or light yoga can be very helpful. Stressful movements may be counterproductive to you during this time. You may feel shame for not having the energy to exercise in your normal fashion. Allow yourself to be a little lazier, even if it means putting on a few extra pounds during this time by not exercising so briskly. You can always take it off when you have passed through the healing crisis.

Jon Burras is a certified yoga therapist and certified Bodymind therapist. He is also a champion for the rights of self-empowerment and believes in letting nature be the strongest guide.

Resources

Emma Bragdon, *The Call of Spiritual Emergency*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1990

Donald Epstein, *healing MYTHS healing MAGIC*, Amber-Allen Publishing, Inc.,
San Rafael, Ca., 1992