

Translators Association Symposium, March 9th 2020

On Translating Trauma

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Please could you define trauma, as there are a lot of misconceptions about what trauma is.

Trauma is what happens inside us in response to what happens *to* us.

When our internal system – i.e. our physiological, psychological and emotional systems – get overwhelmed by fear and helplessness in response to a real or perceived external threat, we are experiencing trauma.

This may be something that is happening to us, or something that we witness, or that we hear about. That can be a single event trauma, such as war, or an assault, or it could be an ongoing, pervasive threat, like childhood abuse or constant bullying.

No one can tell another person that what they have experienced isn't traumatic. It's entirely subjective, and dependent on the life experiences of that individual.

In the case of children, adverse childhood experiences such as living in frightening households, or being subjected to racism or other forms of abuse, can be experienced as traumatic, meaning that we carry this feeling of fear into our adult lives.

What is vicarious trauma, & who's at risk?

Vicarious trauma is the phenomenon of experiencing post-traumatic symptoms after hearing or reading about or watching someone else's trauma.

This could be listening to someone's story, or reading and translating someone else's horror over and over again, to the extent that it gets into the very fabric of our own nervous system.

Anyone is at risk of vicarious trauma, but there are a few things we can look out for;

- Anyone with their own experience of trauma which is unresolved
- If we struggle with our own boundaries and self-care, e.g.: not taking care of ourselves when we need to, and feeling 'well' enough to have the capacity to listen to someone else's pain, puts us more at risk.
- Having no one to talk to about the feelings that are evoked by what we are reading, translating or performing
- Being so 'in someone's pain' that it's difficult to remember who we are and why we are doing this
- Being burnt out and under-supported.

How does trauma manifest itself? What are the signs and symptoms?

Some emotional or psychological signs are:

- anxiety, and being fearful a lot of the time
- feeling disconnected or numb
- feeling sad or hopeless
- anger and irritability at seemingly small things.

Physical symptoms can be:

- insomnia or nightmares
- feeling tired a lot of the time
- a quick startle response
- high blood pressure and racing heart.

How can we as translators protect ourselves when translating traumatic material?

Process your own trauma! Know your capacity. What might have been OK for you then might not be OK for you now.

Have support in place when you know the work you will be doing is tackling traumatic content, and plan your workload so you're not just focusing on that piece of work.

Limit your exposure to traumatic content. That might mean working in shorter bursts than normal.

Reflect on how you feel about the content; have a sense of how it may be impacting on you.

Ensure that your own mental health is being cared for before embarking on a piece of work that has traumatic content.

Know that experiencing vicarious trauma is a really human and normal response to working deeply with trauma.

If affected, how can we heal ourselves?

Get some support! That could be from a therapist or a counsellor. Having someone with whom to process the 'overwhelm' is crucial.

Trauma disrupts our body and our brain's natural state, so we need to move our body. This could be through exercise, which releases endorphins and burns off stress hormones, or it could be gentle restorative movement, such as slow yoga or dance.

Breathe. Breathing is the remote control for our nervous system. Breath work, either with a professional or even at home using an app, will help the body start to regulate out of a fear response and into its regular state.

Go slowly. Recovering from vicarious trauma isn't going to happen overnight. We need to give ourselves time to heal.

Connect with other people. We need to feel safe to heal from trauma, and being with other people helps us feel safe.

Find out what regulates your nervous system and do lots of it.