**Summary of Podcast from Bessel Van der Kolk -Trauma specialist April 2020**

**Information has been included that reflects the Irish situation of dealing with Covid 19.**

**(Ger O’Hara)**

**New and Developing Trauma**

**Pre-conditions for trauma**

* **Lack of predictability** –As humans, we all need to organise our lives into predictable schedules. In these uncertain times we are currently living through it is important to make life as predictable as possible so we can draw up a schedule/routine . It is important to plan to meet people when restrictions are lifted, so anticipate events such as meeting for lunch, going for a walk/run with friends, attending a yoga class. While socially distancing we can all keep in contact with friends and families by phone or using technology such as Skype/Zoom/WhatsApp. When creating schedules, it is important to factor in what you are looking forward to such as walks you would like to do, meals to share with others, places to visit, plan holidays etc. It is important to put yourself in a timeframe of things to look forward to. You can create a calendar and share with others.
* **Immobility -** when traumatised our bodies can become immobile, so it is essential at present to move our bodies into action- by going for a walk, doing some exercises, yoga and to keep moving each day. The loss of our physical sense can activate a fight/flight response as we currently have to self isolate we cannot activate our flight response. We need to take action in the form of exercise so that the fight response can be activated in a positive way. If this need to escape a situation is not directed in a positive way it can result in violence and an increase in incidents of domestic violence which we are seeing reported in the Irish media by women’s Aid and other Domestic Violence support Services. Our stress hormones when activated trigger humans to move, protect and take care of ourselves. Humans are designed to cook meals together, build homes, gather food, go to work, take care of the home and to take care of others. These are some of the activities that we can do while staying at home. At this time, we need to self-regulate and control our emotions, behaviours and thoughts. Activities such as yoga, meditation and mindful breathing can all help to calm the body and help get a grip on our physiological reactions as if we do not deal with them then we may revert to negative ways of dealing with our feelings such as using alcohol and drugs to cope with our thoughts and feelings.
* **Loss of connection** - While having to stay at home it is easy to lose connection with others , especially if a person lives on their own or are cocooning if they are older, the person will not be seen, heard or given attention. It is essential that we remain connected to family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. Humans are connected creatures and do not exist as individuals, it is essential that we hang out, spend time, talk to and embrace with others. During this time of socially distancing this can be very difficult. It is important to be connected with others brains, bodies and being in synchrony with others as this connection fundamentally shapes who we are, so it is essential to still have eye contact (this can be virtual) so that we maintain in rhythm with others. When we cry we’re supposed to get a response, when we laugh we are supposed to laugh with others. Those are the rhythms of life by which we develop as humans and sustain ourselves. Sounds, facial expressions, movement and voices keep us in synchrony with others so it is important to still have family meals, play games, make music or tell stories even if these have to be done virtually. If we look at Italy and Spain people are singing and making music from their balconies to maintain connections with others. These are all physiological ways of maintaining connections with others.
* **Numbing out and spacing out** - When traumatised a person can experience a loss of self and become cut off and stop feeling emotions. This can happen when experiencing social isolation if a person feels anxious, stressed and traumatised. We need to look at how we can keep the body and mind in synchrony with others and by the connection with others it can help to be in touch with ourselves. It is important that we notice ourselves and what is going on in our bodies as if we do not we are like headless chickens running around like automatic creatures and our responses will be automatic with anger, fear and irritation being our responses to situations. Once you can start noticing what is going on for you then you can start making choices. This is easier if there is someone who can help you notice and to name things for you and if you can also name things e.g. this is what is happening for me now. It is important to share your feelings, talk about them, cook for others, call friends and family as these are the things that make us feel alive and continue to be in connection with others . We need to be mindful with self-compassion and acknowledge that we may feel anger but be aware that these emotions have played a role in helping humans to survive as anger is an emotion that plays a role in managing unbearable threats.
* **Loss of sense of time sequences** – When feeling traumatised there can be a feeling of losing a sense of time and that the current situation will last forever. It can be difficult to distinguish between the days of the week or when the weekend comes around. When traumatised it can feel that time stops, so it is important to have a routine, to schedule events – it can be a skype call, phone call so we are connected with reality.
* **Loss of safety** - When we are feeling unsafe then we can also feel traumatised. This loss of safety that a person may feel at present may be further complicated by feelings of loss of control, unpredictability, loss of routine as well as worries for the future such as unemployment, loss of home and poverty. Safety can be achieved through touch, cuddling and from what we see and this is especially important in the development of an internal sense of safety.
* **Loss of sense of purpose** – When cut off from others, not going to work/college/school we can feel that we lack a sense of purpose in our lives. It is important to still exercise, cook a family meal, connect with friends, family, colleagues and neighbours to give a sense of purpose in the day for all of us and to do activities that we enjoy such as reading, watching movies or talking to friends so we can reclaim our sense of purpose.
* **Loss of identity** - If a person is struggling with a loss of identity activities such as meditation can help as the person notices uncomfortable feelings , thoughts and sensations in the body and will be aware that the thoughts, sensation have shifted somewhere else and that our feelings and thoughts are constantly moving , changing . It is very important when dealing with potential trauma to be aware of our inner state and that every moment is different from the next so we begin to develop an internal sense of safety and of self. When people are forced to stay at home in a small house where it can be challenging to have any privacy or personal space it can be helpful to establish a place where they can withdraw. This may be a room, a chair , the garden and when you are there you make it clear that you should not be disturbed . Traumatised people feel unsafe in their own body and at present we are constantly bombarded with thoughts, feelings, bad news from the media and in trying to control all this negative information we often become experts in ignoring our own feelings and numbing our awareness of self. We may try to hide from ourselves to block out what is going on for us in our internal world.

There are no experts dealing with a pandemic such as Covid 19, however it may raise issues for people from their past as their families may have been impacted by other pandemics such as the Spanish flu in the 1800s, or in Ireland the outbreak of tuberculosis as these pandemics can impact on societies and families may struggle in dealing with their families history. These events can have a genetic impact on people as well, as if a family member has been imprisoned in the past the experience of being locked up or not being allowed out could trigger these experiences . These genetic experiences organise how we think about things and can result in the self being disorganised and feeling overwhelmed, distressed and traumatised.

* Activities recommended to help – Stay connected with family, friends, colleagues – whether that is by being at home or virtually by phone, skype, e-mail or facetime
* Exercise and move – this can be a short walk, stretching, yoga or Pilates
* Connect with your breathing and use breathing methods to help reduce anxiety
* Meditate and use mindfulness skills to calm the mind, connect with the body and relax