

Trauma and Relational Hypervigilance



by DARBY STRICKLAND

Beth Ann asked for help with her marriage. Her relationship with Dan felt strained. In the last year, their once-healthy marriage had become filled with anxiety. The recent revelation that her father had a string of affairs was impacting her, and Dan understood that. He had also been supportive and transparent, enduring her new posture of questioning him about his comings and goings fairly well. But he could not understand why she could not relax around him. Beth Ann was having panic attacks when he left for work and would ask him what he was doing whenever he picked up his phone. Dan felt like she was constantly hovering. She agreed that she was always trying to “read” him. “Dan has given me no reason not to trust him,” she told me, “but I notice that I am way more suspicious of him than I used to be.”¹

This was not the only problem, however. Beth Ann also started to pull away from other people, including her friends and family. She became increasingly anxious that she would let someone down. When

1. The names and details in counselee examples throughout this article are fictional characters based on my counseling experience.

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relational complications arose, she assumed people were upset with her and would catastrophize the outcome. It was just easier to pull back and not engage with others, even those she once loved spending time with. After a family event, she would be so exhausted that she would not want to get out of bed the next day.

As her counselor, I wanted to learn more. Beth Ann told me that about two years ago, her father was sick, so she would regularly go home

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to help her mother take care of him. On one of her visits, she discovered letters and pictures revealing that her dad had a secret life. Not only did he have a string of affairs, but he also had another family in another state. She saw pictures of half-siblings and letters between him and this other “wife.” Her mother was devastated.

The family confronted him, but soon after, he took his own life. Beth Ann was distraught because she believed it was her fault—that her actions ruined her mother’s life and caused her father’s death.

Beth Ann was weighed down by guilt and self-loathing. How could she not have known? This was much more than an affair. It was another entire family! In the weeks to come, she began to put pieces together and was able to reinterpret some events. As a result, she could see how the family had been systematically deceived. It was crushing. She began to grieve a father she had once cherished but who never existed. The depth of the deception was life-changing, and the resulting anxiety about her marriage and her other relationships continued to increase.

Beth Ann is experiencing what counselors call *relational hypervigilance*, an intense and pervasive watchfulness that seeks to assess the potential relational harm others might perpetrate (e.g., betrayal, abandonment, rejection). It may arise from a physical trauma like sexual assault or a relational trauma such as betrayal. People struggling with this are on alert, obsessively making observations and assessments (knowingly and unknowingly) about others. They often base their judgments on their perceptions rather than solid information.

Trauma victims are right to ask if the people they have let into their lives are trustworthy. Some people *are* dangerous, so it is not morally

wrong to be on guard. However, this self-protective way of thinking can become a problem itself. Living on alert and processing so much input is exhausting, and it can be hurtful and unloving to those in a person's life who *are* trustworthy, like Beth Ann's husband. This is what we will focus on in this article. We want to help victims steward their learned relational hypervigilance by more fully understanding their experience and learning new ways to address their anxiety. We also hope to restore their ability to connect to a Christian community that is supportive of them in their suffering.

Relational versus Physical Hypervigilance

We are all familiar with hypervigilance, though we might not have a name for it. Perhaps the most well-known type is *physical* hypervigilance. Many of us have heard stories about combat veterans breaking out in cold sweats in response to loud noises like fireworks or a car backfiring.² The sounds put their bodies on high alert even though no threat is present. Or consider someone who was mugged. They feel lingering fear while walking alone at night and are especially attentive when a stranger walks toward them. They might even react physically to harmless noises they misinterpret as threats.

Our experiences sharpen our perceptions of our environment and shape our interpretations. This is true for all of us. I recently taught my son to drive, and while he was learning, I was hyperaware of all the other cars and bikers around us. I had a level of vigilance that was uncomfortable (for both of us!). Or think of the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We all reacted to a cough differently than we did before.

Relational wounds can have similar effects. Someone who suffers deep interpersonal trauma might also experience feelings of hypervigilance and apprehension. Why? Because those who experience relational trauma also learn, and rightly so, to be more alert to avoid additional suffering. Imagine being sexually violated by your boyfriend, finding out your spouse had multiple affairs, or being verbally eviscerated by your mother year after year. These events can have longer-term impacts. Even

2. Hypervigilance is an aspect of PTSD. I would characterize this as primarily physical hypervigilance, not relational. For more on the complexities of PTSD, see Matthew McCraney's article in this issue.

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