

# Shock Treatment

By

**Pietro Abela**

The client before me says she has been to therapists, psychiatrists, doctors, acupuncturists and talked to friends and family and still she cannot seem to get her life together. She has not worked in the last six years. She virtually sees no one (her friends and family seem to stay away from her, she says she thinks they must be sick and tired of her moaning and moping).

I ask, "When did you lose your husband?"

"Six years ago," she replies.

Later in the session she seems more willing to open up and talk. She tells me she feels safer and more comfortable with me. I decide to ask her a deeper question:

"What happened for you to lose your husband?" I ask.

"I cannot go there," she says, unable to hold back tears, "It was such a shock, and I have never gotten over it, even to this day."

This lady is able to spell out what is going on for her. She is saying quite clearly she is still in shock over her loss, and that loss is affecting her in all matters of her life. Most people I see suffering long-term shock are unable to even to be as open as she is. Usually I have to piece together the clues, most of which are hidden beneath behaviours that could easily be misinterpreted as depression.

When we hear that someone is in shock it is usually because that person has suffered an accident, loss or trauma that has caused the system to fuse out. We expect the person to move out of shock within a limited time period of one to a few days, because this is the normal expected recovery time period for victims of shock. The reality is that people may remain in shock for years.

Shock is a natural coping mechanism. It is a healthy response to sudden, unexpected changes. It is a kind of reprieve, a numbing out, a time-out of sorts that can create an emotional and/or physical freezing. A person in shock standing by his car upturned in the ditch might tell you genuinely, when you ask him if he is okay, that he feels in that moment, nothing at all. And he doesn't. He may even tell you he feels euphoric. This was exactly my response after skidding out of control on a gravel road frozen by a downpour of freezing rain on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1980 – the same day and almost the same time that John Lennon was being murdered in New York. My limited edition Green Hornet rolled over

twice before resting in the roadside ditch. My younger cousin David and I hung by our seatbelts upside down. After making sure we each were still alive and somehow unharmed, I kicked the window open with the heel of my shoe and climbed out of the car window, then helped David out through the broken glass. I phoned my aunt to come and get us, and waited by the car for them to arrive, barely aware of anything around me. I remember my aunt and uncle running over to us, asking that first-time question all accidents victims seem to hear, "Are you alright?" Truly, I felt absolutely wonderful and I told them this. I felt a joy for life that I had rarely experienced before. David, on the other hand, said he felt numb and confused.

Shock is an out-of-body experience. Another well known interpretation of out-of-body is being ungrounded. There is some advantage in the understanding of this state by imagining that our physical body is surrounded by a bubble of energy. When we are ungrounded or out-of-body this bubble is raised so that the greater mass of the bubble is above and beyond the head, while the lower extremities of the body have a less dense bubble mass. We lose our grounding easily every day. Our days tend to be filled with changes of all kinds that challenge our ability to stay in present awareness. If you walk along the street and a dog's leash wraps around your legs almost knocking you over, it is likely you will move out of your body. And then you will recover, feel a little startled, but carry on with your walk. On this day of near catastrophes, the person approaching you from the opposite direction bumps into you and almost knocks you down to the ground because her mind is on the dinner date she is late for. You can be sure she is out-of-body. Probably bumping into you brings her down to earth, for a moment as she apologizes to you, but with equal probability she hurries off in confusion as resumes her worried thoughts that brought her into the ungrounded state in the first place.

This is life. The truth is that we all move into shock on multiple occasions every day, sometimes every hour of our lives. But we usually recover from our mini episodes fairly quickly. Shock or the out-of-body state is essentially one of nature's ways of helping us cope with the unexpected. We often say about life, that it has its ups and downs. In reality we are up and down with life, as we endeavour to cope with the challenges put before us.

However, there are times the ups and downs can be like swinging on a swing, where the higher we swing, the more euphoric the feeling. When trauma strikes, such as the car accident I experienced, the death of a loved one, maybe the loss of a business or some treasured belongings due to theft, we may experience deeper or higher levels of shock: the out-of-body experience is more intense, meaning the bubble of energy rises so high it is as if you lose touch of your physical or emotional body. This can be a high. It is a similar high to the high you experience when you take drugs, or when you are totally and "helplessly" in love. When adrenaline courses through your system and you feel nothing really matters, everything is going to work out to be fine and you feel almost super-

human and you can do just about anything you want. This is how I felt shortly after my car accident. Alternatively, with this level of high you may feel numb, confused and unable to understand what has just taken place in your life, as David felt. Whichever form of shock you experience, your system is coping by escaping from the reality of the situation in order to re-adjust and prepare for the bump back down into the feelings left behind.

Out-of-body or shock is a movement away from the present. It is an escape from the feelings associated with the trauma. When that down-to-earth occurs you invariably face the head on reality of the situation that has recently taken place. When we were at home and Uncle Ed first told me my car was a write-off I initially didn't get it. I couldn't take it in. Wisely, Uncle Ed could see that I was in shock, that I wasn't fully present. So he backed off and chose to tell me again later. I wasn't ready to deal with the reality of the situation, so my system opted me out of reality – for a while. When he did tell me I was more grounded, I was in my body, there was no euphoria, I felt the loss, the fear that I had nearly lost my life and the need for someone to hold and comfort me, which my aunt obligingly provided. I was later also able to grieve the near tragic loss of my life.

Most who have experienced shock return from it and through time, process the feelings around the event. Usually there is a grieving process or a time of mourning, anger may emerge at some point, there may be confusion and self-doubt. These are the emotional valve releases that assist us in coping with change, that help us adapt to life after the event that initiated the shock in the first place.

But some people do not come back down to earth. For some it seems easier to avoid it for vast amounts of time rather than move through the natural rhythms of coping that essentially ask us to accept the tragedy, loss or occurrence. When this happens the person's healing process freezes. They place themselves in a time warp where emotionally they do not advance forward. By sustaining this out-of-body experience they both continue to avoid the circumstance that occurred and, at the same time, they never get over it.

As a therapist it is quite easy to diagnose that the lady is still suffering from the loss of her husband from six years ago. However, I would be making a mistake were I to encourage her to start dealing with her loss. Likely she would not come back for another session with me. Her family and friends will have been telling her this probably for the last six years. She will be tired of hearing it. Plus, it is not what is truly current for her. Her present reality is that she is in a state of shock and has been so for the last six years. I present this to her. I tell her she is in shock and the first thing we need to work on together is how to gently move her beyond shock so that she can discover the strength to move through her loss and start being present to her life again.

It has never occurred to her that she is in shock, and that she has been so for the last six years. But she says it makes sense to her. I ask her if she is ready to work with her shock. She tells me she is. And so I begin preparing myself and my room to apply the treatment I created some years ago, I call the Treatment for the Recovery from Shock.