

Re-Thinking PTSD: Existential Reflections on the "Trauma Industry"

David Van Nuys interviews Ofer Zur, PhD

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Everybody is framing everything in terms of PTSD and trauma. Everybody has their own little holocaust of some sort. Moving around the world we see what is perhaps trauma. My grandparents died in the holocaust so I have a strong relationship, identity relationship, to what is traumatic and what is true holocaust.

David Van Nuys: That was the voice of my guest, Dr. Ofer Zur, speaking about what he sees as an alarming misuse of the concept of traumatization and PTSD. Ofer Zur Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist and forensic consultant practicing in Sonoma, California.

He's the director of the Zur Institute which is one of the most extensive online CE programs for psychologist, counselors, licensed professional counselors, social workers, MFTs and nurses. His teaching, consulting with therapist, and writing focuses on private practice issues outside managed care, ethics, standards of care, boundaries, dual relationships and Internet addiction.

His books include *Dual Relationship and Psychotherapy, HIPAA Friendly, Private Practice Handbook* and *Boundaries in Psychotherapy*. Dr. Zur has deep concern regarding the harm inflicted by dogmatic, inflexible, and ideologically rigid psycho-therapeutic practices. On his articles page at ZurInstitute.com, you'll find dozens of free articles, guidelines for psychotherapist and the public. Now, here's the interview.

Dr. Ofer Zur, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Thank you, Dr. Dave. It's really nice being with you.

David Van Nuys: Well, it's good to finally have a chance to interview you especially since you've made it possible through your Zur Institute for me to offer some of my interviews for continuing education credit through the Zur Institute of which you are the founder and director.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: It's fun. Your interviews bring more livelihood to online education, make it a little bit more interesting and of course for everybody to be able to listen to it on their iPods, iPads, iPhones on the go.

David Van Nuys: Exactly. Exactly. I certainly agree with that perception. I'm really excited to be able to make that available to my listeners out there and to have your help in marketing that. Now you're a person of very diverse interest since I've got to know you and have a very fascinating background. One of the things that you've been writing and talking about recently is your take on post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD on the one hand, and on the other, an alarming tendency to frame everything in terms of PTSD and victimization, do I have that right?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: You're absolutely right. I grew up in Israel. This is where my accent is from. When I moved, I worked and lived in Africa and Europe and ended up in California. I noticed how easily, especially in the last 10, 15 years, since the mid-90s, definitely in the new century, everybody is framing everything in terms of PTSD and trauma.

Everybody has their own little holocaust of some sort. Moving around the world we see what is perhaps trauma. My grandparents died in the holocaust so I have a strong relationship, identity relationship, to what is traumatic and what is true holocaust.

David Van Nuys: Right, there's trauma and then there's trauma. Before we get into the whole victimization thing, and you're underscoring this by talking about your grandparents... You're not denying the reality of PTSD, such as that suffered by your grandparents in the holocaust, by soldiers in war and so on are you?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: I was a soldier in the war and I faced my own trauma. I was wounded in the '73 war, so absolutely not. When I talk about the PTSD epidemic, I'm not talking about women who are raped at gunpoint. I'm not talking about soldiers coming from Afghanistan or Iraq or Pakistan or whatever anybody who doesn't want to fight another war.

We definitely have true PTSD like the DSM requires: a person experienced, witnessed or confronted with an event or events that involve actual threat, threatened death or serious injury or a threat to the physical integrity of self and others. I am talking about when people just get angry and put it under PTSD or people get hurt feelings and they put it under PTSD. People get sexually harassed on the job and put it under PTSD.

I remember being shocked about it because I lived in Africa and saw what trauma is. Whether in Africa or in the far east where there are monsoons and floods and hundreds of thousands people dying in the Philippines,

they have a different attitude about it. They don't feel necessarily victimized and I'm not sure even if they feel traumatized.

David Van Nuys: Well, that's fascinating.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: They see it as part of life. The untouchable in India are traumatized on a daily basis, it's part of who they are, part of their identity. We can say it's unjust, we can say it's unfair, we can say it's immoral, we can say all the things about it that probably may agree or not.

We assign trauma to anybody who is angry or have some hurt feeling and it becomes this industry. It's really, it's about, has to do about life threatening event or perception of.

David Van Nuys: Well, that's interesting. You're adding a dimension here that I don't think we'll find in the manual, which is that the way it's framed in reality by one's life experience and life expectations seems to make a difference in terms of whether or not it will be perceived as a trauma, when you refer to the untouchables for example.

Their life experience frames things such that an experience that might be traumatic to an American is not perceived as traumatic by them.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Absolutely. Whether it's a monsoon and hundreds of people drowned and losing their homes, drought in sub-Sahara or the Somali desert, where I lived with these people, people die. People die every day. They didn't look at or even view Somali desert in this light that I said, that the loss of life was anything but part of life.

They did not see, it did not register to them as a traumatic event. It was part of the flow of life. Five out of six or seven kids die in the Somali desert and somebody can say Thank God. Because the desert cannot support them. You're absolutely right. Life experiences determine your perception and definition and reaction to what is or isn't trauma.

David Van Nuys: Okay. Well, before we get more into that, I still want to dwell on what is trauma PTSD. I have to say, that was really brought home to me very very powerfully. There've been some war documentaries... there was one called Restrepo, I'm blocking on the name of the book but I read the book as well.

There's a documentary running on HBO right now called War Torn. It is so powerful. It shows dismembered bodies and so on, truly upsetting imagery, and shows how profoundly our servicemen are affected by what

they go through there, and of course there are so many dimensions of it, not just the viewing of bodies or friends blown apart, but also the constant danger, the inability to know who's a friend and who's an enemy, who's an ally, who's not, et cetera. You mentioned that you yourself served in the Israeli military?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: I was a Lieutenant and a Paratrooper in the Israeli Army.

David Van Nuys: My goodness, a paratrooper.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: I was wounded in the '73 war. We need to remember that just being exposed to a life threatening situation that every combat is supplied with this items that identify that indeed it's a life threatening situation, that does not by itself constitute post-traumatic stress disorder.

David Van Nuys: Would you say that you experience PTSD as a result of your service?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: No. Absolutely not. It was a very powerful event. I saw everything that you described and much more in regard to death and destruction.

David Van Nuys: Why would you say not?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: I'm saying that because to be suffering from mental illness that's call PTSD, it's not just what you've being exposed to.

David Van Nuys: Right.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: It's a second item that it must be part of the definition is that you have involved intense fear, helplessness, horror, so it's a combination and it's a fact of life in a negative way and there's a long list of items. I was in war, I was wounded. I saw death and destruction of people and animal and everything else around me. It did not traumatize me in a way that make me mentally ill.

David Van Nuys: Yeah. Now, I guess my question is, what do you think inoculated you ... I guess, I have two questions. One is why not you? Two, did you see other Israeli soldiers who in fact you would say did suffer in that way?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: There are many many factors that go to why Second World War veterans did not have PTSD. They came home to spend a couple of months on the boat, which was fantastic way to debrief them and to readjust them to life and then at the end of the day, they may had a cocktail at 5:00, didn't talk to anybody about it. Rarely sometimes the grandchildren will hear some rare stories about grandfather in the war in Europe.

David Van Nuys: Right. I have to dispute what you've just said now, that soldiers in World War II didn't suffer from it. They didn't call it PTSD at that time. It's the terminology from battle fatigue and other kinds of nomenclature has evolved. I worked in the VA hospital system for a while and saw plenty of people that were still suffering from World War II.

In many ways because of the silence, because of not talking to the grandchildren and trying to keep it all buried, I agree with you that probably most soldiers who returned home maybe most did not suffer from PTSD

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: That's what I was referring. You asked me what was the difference?

David Van Nuys: Yeah.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Why most of them didn't? Why most Israelis do not? Some do, some don't. That has to do with several factors. It has to do with the cultural expectation back to the untouchable. It has to do with your spiritual orientation, the culture you grow up in and your belief system, your spiritual, existential world view. Untouchable would be the best example.

David Van Nuys: Yeah. That makes sense.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Then comes a slew of other issues. I grew up personally in a culture that my mother was an existentialist, she was a psychologist. We grew up with Buber and Solder at home. She didn't care for what was served on the table much. Instead of the soup of the day, we have the idea of the day. So the idea of the day was served for dessert on a regular basis.

David Van Nuys: Wow.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: When I was in an awful situation in Gaza strip as a young 20 year old soldier, completely unprepared, and we needed to make decisions that I believed were immoral and unjust, and ultimately left Israel because of that, for moral reasons. I grew up in a household or in a culture that tried to create meaning out of trauma.

Israel was born out of the ashes of the holocaust. Instead of being victims and feeling victimized, they decided we're going to get the best army in the world. Some may argue appropriately that they went too far in the right direction, but this is a different discussion all together.

I grew up both in a culture and a household that invited me to create meaning out of powerful life events and not to frame it as necessarily traumatic and definitely not to frame it as a mental illness, such as PTSD.

David Van Nuys: Again the way we frame things makes a real difference.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Absolutely, we talk about culture, you asked me what are the factors. Culture is a factor, within the culture is a factor, how we frame things. Spiritual orientation is relevant. Then they probably as you saw in the VA some people are more resilient than others.

David Van Nuys: Yes. Resilience was the word I was just going to bring up. I was thinking that I believe Martin Seligman, the psychologist who's associated with positive psychology, has actually received money from the government to try to train soldier in resilience. I don't know how that experiment is coming along. I would guess that maybe it would involve some training in reframing or framing as you suggest.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Absolutely. You can induce resilience. Zimbardo talked about it as well and many other psychologist. There're ways that you can help people preempt events that will not end up being traumatizing. Then you have a culture, like here, that took September 11 and everybody was traumatized, even people who watched it on television, even though it's not a psychologist who of course call it PTSD, because we can make money out of labeling things and more people into our practices. You cannot diagnose PTSD to somebody who watched September 11 towers burning, because they were not exposed to anything that is life threatening. Just because you feel upset, we feel upset, does not qualify them as suffering from mental illness. It doesn't qualify.

We lose track of that for many reasons. One of them is a self-serving reason as psychologists, when we call everything PTSD. There are cultural issues, there are personal issues, there are educational issues around resilience, how much the culture is oriented to its meaning, the spiritual belief of the culture, as well as economic forces, such as what we see in the psychology profession calling everything PTSD because they can gain so much financial economic benefits (and so does the pharmaceutical companies too).

David Van Nuys: Yeah. Psychology and the pharmaceuticals. So you are indicting our own profession, yours and mine, as having a financial stake in creating a kind of PTSD industry, you indict the pharmaceutical companies, psychologist, psychiatrist, social workers.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Add to the list, the PTSD industry is run also, not only by the pharmaceutical industry as a mental health, behavioral health people, but also by the attorney who filing lawsuits and claiming PTSD for New York school teacher who was tardy for a year and a half and was fired. Then he got PTSD for being fired. No responsibility. The lack of responsibility by this three groups of organization or professions that are indeed likely to benefit financially from calling everything that moves and talks PTSD.

What's so important to understand is there are true people who are traumatized. Again children who faced extreme sexual and physical abuse. Women who are being raped violently. Soldiers, there are situations that indeed people face, sometimes life, car accidents will qualify under life threatening.

David Van Nuys: What would your message then be to fellow psychologists, fellow mental health professionals, given what you've said that there is genuine PTSD out there but there's also stuff maybe that masquerades as PTSD. What would you hope to see as a result of what you're saying?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: I hope to have some more reflection about our own self-interest, talking about fellow therapist and mental health professionals. We need to stick with the DSM diagnosis that it must involve an experience of actual or threatened death or serious injury. We just need to be honest and we need to be professional.

Then perhaps, my advice would be to remember that different people respond to traumatic event such as September 11. It was a true trauma for the people in the towers because they faced threatened to death and serious injury for sure. Many of them died. That some people who survived this situation, cannot and do not benefit from debriefing. They do not benefit from talking about it.

David Van Nuys: In fact, I think there's some evidence, at least in some cases, talking about it makes it worst.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Absolutely. Talking about it can re-trigger unnecessary brain pathways that are not necessarily to be triggered and to cause anxiety and depression and fear and agoraphobia, and whatever it does to some people. We need to find out, some people may need to go for a walk and talk. Some people need to talk in the office in traditional way. Some people may need to have some body work.

Some people need to do some dream work and some people need to do nothing. When my wife is upset about something, what she does, she goes and meditates.

David Van Nuys: You're really saying that the treatment approach needs to be individualized?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Exactly. She is not a woman that needs to talk. If you lock her into a place where she need to talk to another human being, this will be traumatizing on its own. Give her two dogs, two cats, and a couch. She'll process her thing very well. Thank you.

David Van Nuys: Yeah. Yeah. Now one of the things that you've talked and written about are trends in diagnosis, that's another element here, isn't it?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Trend in diagnosis. Yeah.

David Van Nuys: Diagnosis are fashionable during different periods of time.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: It's true. We used to have in the 80s, if you remember. Everybody was going for borderline.

David Van Nuys: Yes. Yes.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Then we had the child abuse epidemic. Then in the 20th century, there'd be many more other trends, the eating disorder had, and the multiple had its years of claim to fame. Then since September 11 and towards the end of the 20th century, the PTSD is really becoming big, and of course next to it, this day and age, is bipolar disorders.

Now we see sometimes young children as one or two years old being diagnosed with bipolar. You can imagine who makes money out of this kind of diagnosis. The ADHD, also who makes money of diagnosing every child who is spirited, with a lot of spirit or doesn't go along with his abusive parents as ADHD. Somebody makes money out of that too.

We have trends in diagnosis which shows us that it's really maybe economic factor, maybe professional factor rather than the nature of human kind.

David Van Nuys: Now, I think one of the courses in your Zur Institute was built around the writing of Charles Sykes, an author of a widely-acclaimed book *A Nation of Victims*, that came out in 1992. I haven't read that book. It sounds like

his argument is very much along the lines of what you're saying. Tell us a bit about why are we a nation of victims?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.:

Yeah. He called it a nation of victim and definitely I wrote similar pieces of writing, where I identify how everybody is a victim of some sort. If you add all the people who are victims of sexual abuse and physical abuse and spousal abuse and boss's abuse and Internet abuse, whatever it is, you probably get to have a few thousand percent of the population is somehow is a victim.

Again it ties to what we said before, the untouchables do not perceive themselves as victims. The people that I saw in Somali that died from the drought did not perceive themselves as victims. I didn't perceive myself as a victim in the Middle East Wars that I was involved in and so are the people in Siberia that have minus 40 degrees where many people died and not see themselves as victims. Here, not even the West, because Europe is different. In United States somehow it goes like that. Something that you don't like happen to you. Something that you don't think should happen to you because American have the sense about a constitutional right to be happy, happiness. If you cannot pursue your happiness, you got violated, your constitutional right is violated and it must be bad, it must be wrong. It's not just shit happens, sorry for the language. It just something is wrong.

Then we're looking to who to blame, of course psychology is forward on blame mothers and later on men were to blame, government, car companies, military industrial complex or even our genes.

We don't like something that happens to us, that must not be right, we need to blame somebody. Once we blame them and we have a target, we call the attorney in combination of mental health people and lawyers, and you have a nice package of lawsuits. This is our way to deal with things that we don't like.

PTSD is being introduced in court very very loosely for somebody who was just angry for being harassed, being fired for not showing up or for a speeding ticket, parking ticket, whatever it is, being called bad name. We've become indeed a nation of victims where everybody is leap frogging over everybody else competing to the status of victims.

By that we are really reducing or we are missing on the true victims amongst us.

David Van Nuys: Okay. We say don't blame the victim. Some people might think that you are blaming these people who are claiming to be victims.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: I move away from blame or not blame, but I definitely look at responsibility and I have a scale on my online course on victimhood and my articles have a scale. A child who is being sexually or physically abused is innocent, they bear no responsibility. I go to a controversial issue here.

A woman who marry the fifth man who abused her and dated another 10 men who abused her physically and sexually and whatever else, for whatever reason that she does it, she is not as innocent as the young child who is at the mercy of his abuser. She's making a conscious choice to marry abusive men again and again.

It's not that she's responsible to the violence that occurred to her, but she is responsible to her choices. I'm moving away from don't blame the victim or blame the victim to understanding how victims contribute. I was arrested one time in Zambia, when Zambia did not have relationship with Israel.

Israel was helping with [Inaudible 00:28:11] to fight Zambia. I was in the wrong place and the wrong time, I was arrested. My question for myself, what the hell was I doing there? It wasn't right that I was arrested, it was a very very terrible experience. I got hysterically blind and I didn't know where I was. It was really bad.

When I came out or while I was there, I said what the hell were you thinking when you went to Zambia without any relationship with Israel and didn't have American passport at the time. I took responsibility. If you, as a white man, go to Harlem at 2:00 in the morning, get robbed, you are responsible for the people who robbed you or you got hurt.

You are responsible for being dumb enough to go to Harlem in 2:00 in the morning or to East Oakland, whatever the place will be.

David Van Nuys: Yeah.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: That you should have known. I'm moving away from blame or no blame to see what level of responsibility people should take.

David Van Nuys: I like that idea of a scale. It makes sense to me. What about courts, I know sometimes, you've been an expert witness. Have you not?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: I've been expert witness numerous times. On many times, on issues of PTSD and victimization. The problem with the courts, it's a yes and no.

David Van Nuys: Right. That's what I was going to say. Black and white.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: I have a scale that goes from completely innocent, the way I describe the child, to number two, the women who marries for the fifth time another abuser, all the way to people who are 100% responsible for their violent action or whatever action that they had. I have a scale of one to five.

For example, teenagers who play the chicken game are number three. They're equally responsible for the hurt or damage they caused to each other and to themselves because they are both participants in an activity that has high likelihood of death and injury. You play the chicken game, you get on my scale, a number three.

You decided to do an armed robbery, you are at five. You are 100% responsible if you get hurt or die. If you're a child being abused, you are at one, you are completely innocent. If you are a woman that marries again and again another abuser, you're going to two because it's an interactive. It's familial violence.

David Van Nuys: Okay. Let's talk a little bit about existentialism here. You mentioned that you grew up with existentialism, and an existentialist mother who is exposing you to Sarch and Buber and maybe other existentialist thinkers. In case we have listeners who are not familiar with existentialis,.mMaybe you could lay out what the two or three or four foundational thoughts or attitudes are.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: This is a very good question, Dave. It's so highly relevant to the issue of trauma and crisis, because as I mentioned before, my response to trauma and crisis is that's the existential view. It's not necessarily spiritual and it's not PTSD by approach, which you find very helpful when I work with people who are traumatized or people who are depressed.

Often people who are depressed, I'll ask them, 'what existentially depletes you' rather than 'are you clinically depressed'?

David Van Nuys: They might not know what you mean by existential.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Then I'll explain it to them, the way I'm going to explain it to you. Existential is a term that was developed in that 19th century that focuses on the condition of human existence. At the heart of existentialism, is a

view that people, that there is no inherent meaning in our lives. I'll tell you the four-legged of existentialism.

First of all, there is no inherent meaning in our existence. That means we need to construct it again and again and sometimes when we are in between constructions of meaning, we are perceived to be depressed. That also, the fact that there is no inherent meaning in our existence which is a non-spiritual approach, there is also no predictability or no continuity necessarily.

The second pillar of existentialism that each of us, you and I and the listeners, have the freedom to choose. We can be moral or immoral. We can be decent or cruel, we can be good or bad. We have choices of how to conduct our lives, how to think and how to feel.

Then comes the third pillar, that we need to come to terms with our mortality. This is the main non-spiritual aspect of existentialism. If we are going to die, this would be the end of our lives as we know it.

The last one is our sense of alone-ness, that when we die, we can be surrounded by 30 grandchildren and children and wives and friends. But when we die, we face our own mortality alone. That translates that as you and I struggling with our existential issues, and get to an existential angst and existential anxiety, we are alone in this space, searching for meaning.

David Van Nuys: Yes. Earlier, you were talking about responsibility. That fits into this model somewhere too as well. Doesn't it?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Absolutely because we have a choice how to respond to events that we don't like. When I was wounded in a war, or served in occupied areas, instead of being traumatized and taking medications and going through CBT therapy for the next 20 years, I asked myself the questions "Who am I? Why did I elect to be part of it? What is it like? What is it mean for me to be a young man? How do I want to live? How do I want to act in the future?"

I chose to leave Israel. I chose to pursue for over 10 years the psychology of enmity, to try to understand why people kill without guilt, why I was able to, in this situation, to kill without guilt. I derived meaning.

Sam Keen and I crisscrossed the country and the world toward the end of the Cold War, as part of my attempt to make meaning out of my highly stressful and traumatic war experience.

David Van Nuys: Yes, I've met Sam Keen and actually he used to teach from his book on images of propaganda. I forgot the title of the book.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: *Faces of the Enemy*. Yeah.

David Van Nuys: Yes. *Faces of the Enemy*. I love all those propaganda posters that he managed to dig up, not that I love them, but they were so dramatically illustrative of how we turn a stranger into the enemy and try to justify killing.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: Exactly. I took this war experience and made it a meaningful experience. Whether it was my heart attack or going to Zambia and being arrested because I was so stupid and dumb and didn't see it coming, I took responsibility for this thing, to try to understand. Being in a Somali desert and freaking out, seeing the local tribes killing themselves by polluting their only water hole, I just realized that they were not concerned about death. They had other concerns. I took events that were powerful, traumatic, life threatening and was searching for meaning. The search brought me to psychology.

The search brought me to look at many issues in our culture, as well is in our field. I took the traumatic experiences instead of taking medication and poor me in wasting time in therapy rooms. I constructed meanings around it and hopefully helped not only myself but fellow human beings.

David Van Nuys: Well, as we wind down. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: My hope is that more therapists will look at traumatized clients and try to help them understand a few things. Understand first of all whether the client contributed to their own traumatization, whether they can avoid similar crisis or traumatization in the future. Some crises just come upon us and we need to embrace them and to take this approach to crisis, as a chance to reconstruct meaning. Existentially speaking, crisis is when you lose your sense of meaning in the world and you need to reconstruct it again and again, and to normalize this process, come to terms with death, come to terms with our sense of alone-ness, owning the responsibility that you make choices, whether you admit to them or not.

I think if therapists look at crisis and trauma when appropriate through the existential prism, they will be able to help people develop a sense of efficacy and strengths and hope and resiliency rather than a sense of poor me, I'm a victim and I've been traumatized, I'm being owed and I'm damaged for life.

David Van Nuys: All right. Well said. You've given us some good food for thought here. Dr. Ofer Zur, thanks for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Ofer Zur Ph.D.: You are more than welcome, Dave. It's always pleasure to talk to you on the radio and off the radio.