Sharing My Pain

I can build a pathway to healing that starts with me sharing my story.

October 20, 2021 By Paul Kawata

Over the last few months, I've had several significant losses. Normally, I would keep this personal information private. I shared my pain because too many of us are hurting. You are not alone. The world is crazy right now and it can feel overwhelming. I spoke my truth to shatter the stigma and discrimination that too often follows PTSD and depression. It is also my pathway to healing.

Thank you for all the kind messages of support. Reading your emails helped to feel less alone. Until I admitted there is a problem, it was difficult, if not impossible, to figure out solutions. Right now, it's particularly challenging with so many unknowns. Is it me or is the whole world going crazy? Probably both. Even if you are perfectly fine, it is important to understand that colleagues, friends, and family are hurting. Empathy is critical, yet it is hard to be empathetic when the world feels upside down.

Just to be clear, I am not a therapist, but I do have one. I get one hour every other week to talk just about me and my fears. This is a privilege that is not available to most people and that needs to be fixed. I'm transparent about therapy to dispel the stigma and fear surrounding this topic. I grew up in a world where depression was viewed as a sign of weakness. Only rich white people had psychiatrists. I feel pain because I am a person of color living in America. Buck up and get over it. As a result, I spent too many years not addressing the elephant in the room. I'm in pain. The early days of the epidemic had taken their toll. I never took the time to reconcile what happened to me and my friends and to weep for all that was lost. There was a whole generation taken too soon.

Here I am, 40 years later, and I can still recall the deaths of too many people. The hospital rooms that had that awful antiseptic smell. The nurses who became my best friends as they made up a bed so I could stay in the hospital rooms of friends. Colleagues who died too quickly so friends could not say good-bye. Friends who lingered too long in pain, fighting for every breath. I was a kid in my 20s when the epidemic started, too young to understand the enormity of what was happening to me and my friends. Too naive to be afraid, I just wanted to help.

I share my story because COVID, Black Lives Matter, Climate Change, Abortion Rights, the Jan 6th Insurrection, and Immigration are creating another generation of people living with PTSD and depression. There are too many reasons to feel awful. The pain is real, and it may not go away for a long time. While I don't regret what I had to do during those early days, I wish I had started therapy and building my pathway to healing much sooner.

For too long we've lived with the false paradigm that leaders must have it all together. It's time to tell the truth: leaders can be great and fu**ed up at the same time. More importantly, there are people and medications that can help you manage the pain.

I did nothing wrong because I survived the early days of the epidemic. The pain and loss I experienced was real. I love and miss more people than I can remember. The world was awful during those early days. The fear and vitriol were real. I cannot unsee what I experienced. I can build a pathway to healing that starts with me sharing my story.

I am wounded. It is what it is. Sunshine is my pathway to healing. Too many from my generation are part of the walking wounded. Too many from this generation will soon join us. These are traumatic, fearful times. There are real reasons to be sad and afraid. Leadership can also be about telling the truth and helping the next generation move beyond the pain.

Yours in the Struggle,

Paul Kawata

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