

## Micro-traumatic Experience: Identifying and Healing its Cumulative Toxic Effects

### A Workshop presented by Margaret Crastnopol, PhD

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At the CPPNJ conference on January 22nd, Margaret Crastnopol, PhD, our guest speaker, led us on an exploration of micro-trauma. Micro-traumas are the small, subtle ways in which hidden, cumulative psychic hurts take place within a dyadic relationship that can be mostly good and thus keeps the person connected. Over time, however, this interpersonal dynamic diminishes a person's sense of self-worth and inner security. This ultimately distorts one's character and compromises his/her ability to form healthier relationships going forward.

Much has been written about early childhood development and the subsequent psychopathologies that result in part from the misattunements and other hurtful impacts of childhood caregivers. Crastnopol has built her model of micro-traumas on the shoulders of earlier theorists, especially Masud Khan, Donald Winnicott, W.R.D. Fairbairn and the interpersonalist Harry Stack Sullivan. From a contemporary standpoint, her theory is grounded in the relational perspectives of Stephen Mitchell and Philip Bromberg.

Beginning with Fairbairn (through the lens of Thomas Ogden), Dr. Crastnopol explained that the dynamic that is relevant for her is the actual relationship with a significant other who can be good, but is also often hurtful and demeaning. For example, a "connoisseurship gone awry" dynamic, one of seven variations of micro-traumas that Dr. Crastnopol describes, is an attachment with another person who can never be pleased. This occurs because the mentor, teacher, or patron conveys standards that are too particular, and keeps moving the bar for "good" performance; this engenders the feeling that one can't succeed but must keep trying. For example, a child fears he can never measure up to the standards of an exacting parent, or within the training environment of an institute, a supervisee feels she is never good enough for her supervisor. The individual stays connected and weathers the slings and arrows of the relationship, but pays the price in shame and other disparaging feelings and with a compromised ability to trust.

Human development is ever present throughout the life cycle and in Dr. Crastnopol's view, micro-traumatic patterning can arise and have a significant impact at any stage in development, not just in early childhood. These maladaptive patterns change the way we think and feel about ourselves, how we relate to others and how we expect others to relate to us. Further, because these interactions take place with persons whom we know and trust as promoters of our positive self-esteem, there is the element of surprise and/or the feeling of being ambushed. Because our guard is relaxed and we are not expecting a sideswipe to our sense of self, the impact is usually surprising, if not outright shocking. This experience usually evokes shame, self-doubt, guilt or any number of other negative feelings that remain unarticulated, dissociated and/or suppressed. According to Dr. Crastnopol, many chronically anxious or depressed persons are suffering from the cumulative impact of unrecognized micro-traumas that eventually become significantly destructive.

Dr. Crastnopol also briefly discussed another theorist whose work is different than hers, but related. D.W. Sue's writing concerns "microaggressions" and "microinsults." Sue defines these constructs as the denigrating, discriminating and invalidating speech and behaviors toward groups of persons or individuals belonging to a particular group based on externalities such as race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. By imposing trauma on others, the aggressor becomes hardened to his own feelings, dissociated from compassion and thus develops a diminished ability to relate empathically to others.

Following the discussion of Sue's work, Dr. Crastnopol described another related aspect of micro-trauma. The term "cumulative trauma" was first coined by M. Masud Khan (1963). A prolific interpreter of Winnicott's work, Khan believed that cumulative trauma occurs when the mother fails to provide a "protective shield" (Khan 1963) in order to regulate stimuli and impingements on her child. Without the protection of the mother, the child's developing ego functions are at risk because the child does not yet have the ego strength to protect himself from repeated assaults on his inner world from the external environment.

One type of micro-trauma, Dr. Crastnopol pointed out, that has a long history in literature and film is "gaslighting." The term is taken from the movie, "Gaslight" in which an evil-intentioned husband tries to make his wife think she is losing her mind by lowering the gas lighting in their home, all the while denying it, in order to have her committed to an institution. This would then leave him free to retrieve a treasure of hidden jewels in their home that had belonged to an old woman he had murdered years before.

Dr. Crastnopol spoke about seven patterns of micro-trauma which are published in her book, *Micro-trauma, A Psychoanalytic Understanding of Cumulative Psychic Injury* (2015). They are as follows:

**Uneasy Intimacy:** These relationships tend to be electric and intense, demonstrating an outward appearance of intimacy but one that isn't thorough-going and can't be sustained. The relationship can feel compelling and exciting, and if the relationship is erotically tinged, it is that much harder to disengage. Differences often are over-looked by the thrill of feeling so close with the other until one or both begin to perceive an element of discord that makes the closeness feel hollow.

**Connoisseurship Gone Awry:** As discussed earlier, this is a relationship between an expert and a novice in which the expert mixes his own standards of perfection into the relationship thereby diminishing the novice's sense of cohesion and worthiness. A literary example of this dynamic is George Bernard Shaw's play "Pygmalion" which Crastnopol touched upon in the workshop and discusses in her book and paper on this topic. The storyline concerns a phonetics professor, Henry Higgins, who, on a bet, transforms a lowly flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, into a well-spoken lady. Upon winning the bet, Higgins becomes overly enthused with his success in this ruse. Eliza, on the other hand, is left pondering her sense of self. However, she ultimately regains her innate sense of self-worth and goes forth into the world, the better for her experience and new found abilities. Although Shaw's main concerns were with social issues, such as the hierarchical class system and synthetic values of the upper class, nevertheless, the play remains a good illustration of how "overwhelming another with the elements of one's own talents can enslave the other's spirit under the guise of elevating or conferring greater advantage on the other" (Crastnopol 2012).



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**Psychic Airbrushing and Excessive Niceness:** Dr. Crastnopol defined Psychic Airbrushing and Excessive Niceness as the minimization of flaws; denying the negative and putting a positive spin on that which we know is not positive. Many have learned to act as if everything is OK in the hope that everything will be so. Specifically regarding children, Crastnopol writes in her book, "Conversely, they also learn that displays of anxiety, guilt, shame, or other trappings of the 'bad-me' may make tentative situations considerably worse. So the child works his or her way into the airbrushed niche the parents create---and, in the process, ceases to be governed by his or her own affective reactions." (Crastnopol 2015) Excessive niceness is a cover-up for the negative aspects of one self.

**Unkind Cutting Back:** is the lessening of communication and/or diminished contact with another without

providing an explanation and in a way that feels ambiguous and capricious. The person still wanting the connection is left wondering whether to call attention to the apparent lessening of the connection and thereby risk making it real (where perhaps it's not); or the person may avoid asking about it out of the fear of seeming too needy and thereby driving the other person away. Outright questioning may make a person sound whiny; if you are wrong about the reduced contact, you might seem hypersensitive. The person doing the cutting back may be expressing unconscious anger or a desire to exert control or shame for something that occurred.

Due to time constraints, Dr. Crastnopol was unable to expand during her presentation on all micro-traumatic patternings. As she explains in her book, Unbridled Indignation is a moralistic, judgmental stance that is expressed with contempt, disgust or bitter anger. At times, it can represent a disavowal of one's own shame by projecting what is noxious in oneself onto the other person. It is destructive to the perpetrator as well as to the victim. In my view, we saw examples of this during the recent bitter presidential campaign; the hurling of invectives consisting of disavowed parts of oneself and projecting them onto others.

Chronic Entrenchment refers to psychological and emotional stagnation wherein the individual is stuck in his or her own subjectivity and is unable to make strides to move out of his or her complacency or despair. One example I can offer is the chronic "fall guy" who takes the blame for others' wrongdoings and is unable to relinquish this martyr role. Those close to him, as well as the therapist whose wish is to help free him of this bondage, end up feeling demoralized and discarded by his intransigence.

Lastly, Crastnopol spoke at the workshop about the micro-traumatic pattern she calls "Little Murders," the name taken from Jules Feiffer's play of the same name. This array of onslaughts to one's self-esteem includes off-hand insults, slights, mockery, backbiting, discounting, damning with faint praise and backhanded compliments. An example of a Little Murder taken from Crastnopol's book is of a 45-year old female patient who remembered her mother always warning her not to be too proud of her good grades as she could always be brought down during the next marking period. As a result, this patient's inner voice threatened her with failure whenever she slacked off from her colossal efforts to excel and prove her mother wrong.

Dr. Crastnopol, in her book, recalled her own Little Murders micro-trauma. Some years back she made a very complicated French pastry for her family's holiday gathering. Crastnopol's mother, who always admired her baking, announced to all that it was delicious and was just like the Nabisco icebox cake (made from a generic recipe on the back of the cookie box, with premade cookies and Cool Whip) that she, the mother, had made when they were children. Initially, Crastnopol conjured a brief fond memory of her childhood. Upon reflection, however, she felt dismay that her mother could compare her magnificent creation to her mother's plebian Nabisco cookie and Cool Whip cake! Although we can chuckle at this (thinly veiled) mother/daughter competitive comment, it nevertheless was a not-so-subtle diminishment of Crastnopol's best culinary effort. She acknowledged that she has not enjoyed making her French pastry dessert quite as much ever since.

So, how can the therapist help? At the conclusion of the workshop Crastnopol's suggests that therapists need not develop any highly specialized new tools in treating micro-traumas than those that already exist in treating major traumatic events. It is important to listen and witness what is being articulated and enacted outside of the therapy room as well as what is happening between the patient and therapist. Micro-assaults can be replayed in the therapeutic dyad, such as frequent late cancellations, no shows or taking cell phone calls during the session. The therapist must analyze these carefully and open-mindedly. Ideally, whether a micro-traumatic moment occurs within the analytic relationship or extra-therapeutically, the therapist can help undo its worst effects if she or he can beckon the patient to enter into a non-defensive space wherein the micro-traumas may be divested of their enigmatic power through detailed exploration and the adoption of more favorable and direct ways of relating to oneself and to the other.

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**Bibliography:**

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