

When the caregiver needs solace

The Comfort Garden is an account of the five years Laurie Barkin worked as a psychiatric nurse consultant on the surgical/trauma unit at San Francisco General Hospital. Written in a literary style, these true and fast-moving stories disclose many tragic tales and some humorous. Against the backdrop of patients who have survived motor vehicle accidents, falls, fires, fists, bullets, and knives, *The Comfort Garden* explores what happens to professional caregivers when exposure to tragedy becomes routine.

The title derives from detours into the real garden at San Francisco General Hospital where the author took refuge. Ms. Barkin often visited *The Comfort Garden* to sort out her feelings and lift her spirits. Throughout the book, she uses humor and beauty to counterbalance the sadness and weight of trauma.

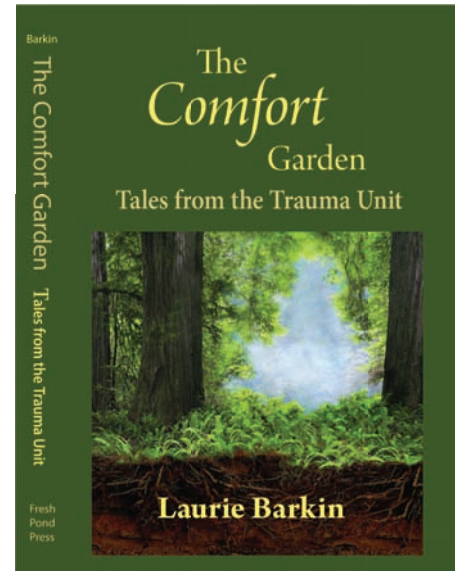
Vicarious trauma can affect anyone who regularly bears witness to victims' stories of violence, abuse, and neglect. As an antidote, regular meetings—to discuss how staff members are coping with what they see and hear in their work with patients—are recommended.

Ms. Barkin also depicts a working parent's ongoing struggle to juggle family life and work, especially when emotions run high in both arenas.

The Comfort Garden, scheduled for February release, will appeal to students, health care

professionals, and anyone whose life has been touched by trauma.

Ms. Barkin is a consultant to the Department of Psychiatry at University of California, San Francisco.



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Reviews

The Comfort Garden

Laurie Anne Pearlman PhD, Co-author, *Risking Connection: A Training Curriculum for Working With Survivors of Childhood Abuse*.

“*The Comfort Garden* is a great read... With its conversational, personal, yet professional style, this book contains essential information and inspiration for all trauma workers.”

Danielle Ofri MD, PhD, Editor-In-Chief of *The Bellevue Literary Journal* and author of *Singular Intimacies: Becoming a Doctor at Bellevue* and *Medicine in Translation*.

“Like a pebble hurled into water, a patient’s story ripples outward, lapping relentlessly into the lives of the caregivers. These stories penetrate caregivers in ways that can be wrenching, uplifting, unsettling, dispiriting, corrosive, inspirational, or numbing. *The Comfort Garden* is one of the first books to examine the effect of these stories on the caregiver. Laurie Barkin takes us into the taut, jarring world of the trauma unit where nurses and doctors face daily battles, both emotional and physical. Barkin tends these battle wounds with empathy, precision, and insight.”

“... an engrossing journey into the contemporary world of hospital psychiatry”

Echo Heron RN, author of *Intensive Care* and *The Story of a Nurse*.

“Psychiatric nurse Laurie Barkin gives the reader a close-up look at the heartbreaking and often chilling situations she faced each day in San Francisco General’s infamous trauma unit. *The Comfort Garden* is the compelling story of one nurse’s struggle to remain compassionate and sane while helping those whose lives have been shattered on the battlefield of the inner city.”

Jack Coulehan MD. Professor Emeritus of Preventive Medicine SUNY; Fellow, Center for Medical Humanities and Bioethics; author of *Medicine Stone*.

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The Comfort Garden, an engrossing journey into the contemporary world of hospital psychiatry... speaks eloquently to the humanity, compassion, and vulnerability of mental health professionals who help their patients navigate through some of the most difficult crises of their lives.”

**“... well-written, clear account
offers both meaning and hope”**

Lenore Terr MD. Psychiatrist and author of *Too Scared to Cry*.

“In an age when hospitals have been turning to quicker-acting medications, faster discharges, and fewer deep and meaningful conversations with patients, Laurie Barkin takes the opposite position. She urges us to make the time to use our knowledge of psychodynamic psychotherapy to help traumatized people early in the course of their distress.”

**Laurie Barkin shows us how
permeable the line actually is between
the cared for and the caregiver.**

Cortney Davis, author of *The Heart’s Truth: Essays on the Art of Nursing*, winner of the *American Journal of Nursing* Book of the Year Award and of an IPPY Silver Medal in Non-Fiction.

Whenever we walk into a hospital or a doctor’s office we often assume that the patients are somehow broken, sick, or frightened and that the nurses and doctors are whole, healthy, and brave. In stories that prove these assumptions false, Laurie Barkin shows us how permeable the line actually is between the cared for and the caregiver. She understands that, no matter, we are all healers and, at the same time, we are all in need of healing. In *The Comfort Garden* Barkin reveals not only the stories of her work with trauma patients but also equally moving stories of her heart. It is by such intimate sharing we are healed.”

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The Comfort Garden: Tales from the Trauma Unit

“... should be on the recommended reading list for the range of professionals who work with survivors of acute trauma.”

Margaret E. Blaustein, PhD. Director of Training and Education, The Trauma Center at Justice Resource Institute, Brookline, MA

The Comfort Garden tells two intertwining stories: the story of the real individuals behind the countless stories of trauma... we hear about far too often (along with those whose stories we rarely hear); and the story of the author, a psychiatric nurse who is among the front line of those who offer these individuals care and comfort. Just as the author is able to significantly impact the lives of those who have suffered, so, too, do the survivors' lives irrevocably impact her own life... Ms. Barkin's text approaches sometimes painful and sometimes redemptive material with honesty, thoughtfulness, and much-needed occasional humor, and should be on the recommended reading list for the range of professionals who work with survivors of acute trauma.”

Frank M Ochberg MD. Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Michigan State University

“I’ve been there — on those trauma units, at those bedsides, in those staff meetings when the work of fixing broken bones and failing organs gives way to the sick thud of realization: this life is lost, although the body will survive. I’ve been there as a medical/surgical intern in San Francisco and as a psychiatry resident at Stanford. I’ve been there as state and federal administrator, struggling to extend a totally inadequate budget to meet the needs of the severely mentally ill. But Laurie Barkin took me back there and left me sadder and wiser, far more intimately acquainted with the highs and lows of work in the current M*A*S*H milieu of urban America, far more respectful of the role of the consulting nurse, far more sobered by the challenge of providing a decent, humane climate for those who survive physical calamity with profound emotional wounds.

Laurie is that rare health professional with a gift for narrative and a story to tell. She is a nurse, an educator, a wife, a mom — and she has remarkable spunk, clarity and resilience. She volunteers to get close, very close, to people at the end of their lives, to parents whose children have been burned, to addicts and AIDs sufferers with obnoxious personalities. She campaigns to retain needed but unprofitable staff “debriefings” — meetings to explore feelings after beloved patients die or after colleagues are forced out of jobs due to budget cuts. She explains her own stress, balancing the joys and obligations of pregnancy and parenthood with the schedule of an overworked nurse at San Francisco General Hospital. Laurie’s book rested, unread, on my desk for 6 months.

As a trauma specialist, I like to read for escape, not for re-immersion in yet another world of crime, cruelty and loss. But once in, I couldn’t stop. Her portraits are, at times, humorous, at times harrowing, but always interesting and realistic. She doesn’t dwell on tragedy. She lets the reader learn from her dilemmas — how to relate to a patient who pushes her away; how to find a way to like a person who thrives on antagonizing others; how to confront a young doctor who has little respect for an experienced nurse.

“This is an important book for any health care worker, but especially for those of us who consider ourselves traumatic stress specialists. It reinforces the values and the spirit that brought us into the field. And it reminds us of the obstacles we face every day: human cruelty, social injustice, dwindling resources. Laurie is no pollyanna. She is realistic and she suffers from vicarious trauma. But she copes and learns and survives and uplifts her fellow travelers. Read this. You’ll be better for it.”

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The Comfort Garden

Tales from the Trauma Unit

By Laurie Barkin, RN, MS

“It’s not the Ritz but this is the best place in the city for treating trauma. The nurses and doctors here are trauma experts. This is where I would want my relatives to be,” Laurie Barkin tells upset visitors at San Francisco General Hospital who are waiting to find out what happened to their relatives who were among the 14 people killed or wounded in the law office at 101 California Street. The gunman was a disgruntled client toting two semi-automatic weapons and 250 rounds of ammunition.

After the surgeons had stitched them up, it was Barkin’s job to help survivors cope with the emotional and psychological reactions to trauma. Barkin, a psychiatric nurse consultant, sees her work as based on the theory that the quicker trauma patients can begin to process painful events by talking about what happened to them, the soon they will begin to recover.

The true stories in *The Comfort Garden: Tales from the Trauma Unit* recreate the fast-pace of work with patients in the surgical trauma unit at SFGH. Although the names of staff and patients have been changed to protect their privacy, the stories are faithful to events as they unfolded. In a given week, Barkin routinely evaluated and treated patients with stab wounds and gun shot wounds, and those injured in motor vehicle accidents, fires, and falls. Further complicating the picture is the astounding number of patients with histories of untreated childhood trauma:

- After weeks on the ICU, Keith, a middle-aged drug abuser, finds himself clean and sober for the first time in 36 years. When asked about his family’s history of depression, he remembers playing in the playground of his housing project when his mother jumped from the 12th floor and landed in front of him.

**“... complicating the picture is the
astounding number of patients with histories
of untreated childhood trauma.”**

- At 11, Shalimar ran away from home and was befriended by a pimp. Five years later, when she told him she was leaving to get married, he shot her in the back, severing her spinal cord.
- A lifetime of trauma began for Gina when she was brutalized while growing up in orphanages. She landed in the trauma unit after falling from the roof of a building. Yet, she exhibits unusual resilience in coping with what life has handed her.

In these intimate stories, readers will come to know vivid characters who test the splintering fringes of the nation’s safety net. They will begin to feel what police, firefighters, emergency room personnel, and psych nurses feel soon after the headlines subside. And they will understand why people working with trauma victims need support to do the work they do.

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