

ONE



After Trauma

Why You Feel Thrown for a Loop

TRAUMA: a bodily or mental injury usually caused by an external agent.

TRAUMATIC EVENTS ARE EXTRAORDINARY, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence or death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe. The common denominator of trauma is a feeling of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation.

—JUDITH HERMAN, MD, *Trauma and Recovery*

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

What makes an event traumatic? There are two conditions. The first is the nature of the event itself—it usually involves actual or feared death or serious physical or emotional injury. The more severe and repeated the circumstances, the more likely they are to be traumatic. The second condition is what the event means to the victim. The same event can be traumatic for one person but not for another. Why? It is because the meaning of the event is just as important as the event itself.

⌘ *Paul and Kirk were in similar serious car accidents. Paul is physically injured and emotionally shaken, but over time, life gradually returns to normal. Kirk is also physically injured but more deeply shaken; his life changes in some fundamental ways. For Paul, the accident was a bad experience; for Kirk, it was traumatic.*

There is no “right” or “wrong” reaction to any life-threatening event. In different circumstances or at different times in their lives, Paul might experience an event as traumatic but Kirk would not. The particular ways in which people are affected by stressful events can differ widely. This reflects the normal differences among people.

COMMON REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

Trauma can affect the whole person, including changes in body, mind, emotions, and behavior. But each person's specific reactions depend on the particulars of the event and the person's unique self and history. Your emotional makeup, personal history, social relationships, previous coping strategies, age at the time of the trauma, and the availability of support before, during, and following the traumatic experience—all these factors help to shape the meaning of the event for you. The particulars of the event, such as the degree of violence or the element of surprise, also shape your reactions. Traumatic events shake the foundation of a person's life. Certain traumatic experiences, such as extremely early experiences of abuse, may interfere with or even prevent a person from developing a solid sense of self. The next section describes some common reactions to trauma. They are summarized in Table 1.1.

Physical Reactions

- ◆ *Trauma is a major stress and it is common for the body to react.* You may have a rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, nervousness, and sleep difficulties, or any of the other reactions listed in Table 1.1. Alternatively, you may react by feeling numb or out of touch with your body. Experience of trauma also puts people at risk for developing a wide range of physical health problems such as cardiovascular disease.

Mental Reactions

- ◆ *Changes in the way you think about yourself.* You may have previously thought of yourself as strong and independent, but if you experienced a brutal, unexpected attack or some other trauma you may now think you can no longer control your fate. You may now feel much more fearful and vulnerable. Your sense of being in control and able to protect yourself may have been shattered.

- ◆ *Changes in how you think about the world.* Some events seem impossible to understand. How can you explain to a six-year-old why her mother and father have been killed in an automobile accident? Why are so many innocent lives lost in terrorist attacks or natural disasters? Tragedies such as these can challenge your basic sense of order in the world.

- ◆ *Disruptions in your thoughts.* Images from the trauma may pop into your mind unannounced and unwanted. You may not feel able to stop these images or stop replaying the event over and over in your mind.

- ◆ *Confusion in your sense of what happened when.* You may be uncertain about the order of traumatic events or unclear about certain details of what occurred. There may be parts of what happened that you don't remember. Forgetting some of your experience can be unsettling but this is a normal way your brain protects you from being totally overwhelmed.

- ◆ *Heightened awareness of your surroundings (hypervigilance).* You may feel

TABLE 1.1. Some Common Reactions to Trauma

Physical reactions	Mental reactions	Emotional reactions	Behavioral reactions
Nervous energy, jitters, muscle tension	Changes in the way you think about yourself	Fear, inability to feel safe	Becoming withdrawn or isolated from others
Upset stomach	Changes in the way you think about the world	Sadness, grief, depression	Easily startled
Rapid heart rate	Changes in the way you think about other people	Guilt	Avoiding places or situations
Dizziness	Heightened awareness of your surroundings (hypervigilance)	Anger, irritability	Becoming confrontational and aggressive
Lack of energy, fatigue	Lessened awareness, disconnection from yourself (dissociation)	Numbness, lack of feelings	Change in eating habits
Teeth grinding	Difficulty concentrating	Inability to enjoy anything	Loss or gain in weight
Feeling out of touch with your body	Poor attention or memory problems	Loss of trust	Restlessness
Risk of health problems	Difficulty making decisions	Loss of self-esteem	Increase or decrease in sexual activity
	Intrusive images	Feeling helpless	
	Nightmares	Emotional distance from others	
		Intense or extreme feelings	
		Feeling chronically empty	
		Blunted, then extreme, feelings	

extremely alert for possible danger in your surroundings. You may scan a room more carefully as you enter to see who's there, where the exits are, and whether there seems to be any risk or danger. You may position yourself near the exit or with your back to the wall. It may be hard to let your guard down and relax.

⌘ *Lester spent 13 months in Iraq with his National Guard unit. He was a Humvee driver and protected convoys. Every minute of every day was filled with hyper-vigilant fear of enemy snipers, roadside bombs, and ambushes. He tried going back to his civilian job but he couldn't take the commute and his constant need to scan the roads and check out the other drivers.*

◆ *Lessened awareness, disconnection from yourself (dissociation).* When feelings become overwhelming and there seems no way out of the situation that triggers them, one protective reaction is to cut off the feelings. This can be experienced as "being outside" yourself, as looking at yourself from outside your body, as feeling

very spacey and out of touch with your feelings, or as not being aware of what is going on around you. Everyone experiences this to some degree, for example, when you “space out” and don’t hear part of what someone is saying to you or when you don’t remember having driven a section of the road. More extreme examples are called *dissociation* and can include not remembering significant or extended portions of your childhood or finding that there are parts of the present day or week that you do not remember. We discuss dissociation in more detail in Chapter 2.

Emotional Reactions

- ◆ *Feelings of fear, inability to feel safe.* If you have been frequently or severely threatened, you may continue to feel unsafe, even when circumstances no longer pose a danger. This can include a sense of being unable to protect yourself and feeling unprotected or threatened by others.

- ◆ *Loss of trust in yourself or others.* Whether the trauma was a random event or a deliberate action by another person, it can leave a deep sense of distrust. You may feel you cannot count on people or things to be a particular way. You may no longer trust your own abilities or judgment.

- ◆ *Loss of self-esteem; feeling shame and hate toward yourself.* Survivors of accidents, crimes, or combat may feel responsible in some way for what happened. If only you had been smarter, quicker, or somehow better, the event would not have occurred. You may feel that because this happened to you, you must have deserved it.

- ◆ *Feeling angry, irritable.* It’s normal to feel angry after trauma but you may feel angry almost all the time toward friends, family, and others who had nothing to do with the trauma. You may find yourself in a rage over small things that didn’t used to bother you.

- ◆ *Feeling helpless.* Being a victim of a natural disaster, crime, accident, or repeated abuse can make us realize how helpless we can be. If you have experienced repeated trauma, you may feel that there is nothing you can do to make things better. You may feel that your actions cannot change or influence current situations. This could leave you feeling especially vulnerable to future harm or devastating loss.

- ◆ *Feeling chronically empty.* After going through a traumatic event you may feel empty, used up, numb, and unable to attach any particular name to how you feel.

- ◆ *Blunted then extreme feelings.* You may feel numb, then suddenly feel surges of strong or even overwhelming emotion that is difficult to control.

✂ *Shortly after returning to the United States from Iraq, Juan heard that a buddy from his unit had committed suicide. Juan felt nothing. He knew he was expected to feel sad, confused, or angry, like the other people who were grieving the death. But he felt totally shut down and numb. Occasionally, however, some little thing would happen, like being cut off on the road, and he’d fly into a rage. The rage just seemed to take over and not let go of him for some time.*

You may vacillate between these two extremes: At times your emotions may feel too powerful to contain, so they flood out or simply shut down and shut off. You may find it difficult to manage your feelings.

Behavioral Reactions

- ◆ *Becoming withdrawn or isolated from others.* You may start withdrawing and avoiding other people. There could be many reasons for this, for example, it may feel safer or more comfortable to be alone.

⌘ *In college, Nancy was date raped by two different men on two separate occasions. She no longer wants to establish any type of relationship with men, let alone date. She is uncomfortable participating in social activities sponsored by her work or her church and spends most of her time alone. Since these assaults, she hasn't been able to develop any new close relationships.*

- ◆ *Avoiding places or situations.* Reminders of the trauma may bring back painful and unpleasant memories. You may find yourself avoiding them even if it means disruptions in your day-to-day life.

⌘ *Ron had worked and socialized downtown for years, before being assaulted at gunpoint one day on his way to work. Although he had never been afraid to be in the city before, now he could no longer return to work, meet friends, or go to favorite evening spots he used to frequent. Being in the city had become a vivid reminder of the assault.*

- ◆ *Becoming confrontational.* You may find yourself challenging or provoking others. You may pick fights or argue more than before.

- ◆ *Changes in eating patterns or other behaviors.* You may find yourself eating more or less than you used to, exercising more or less. You may gain or lose weight as a result. Other behaviors such as sleep patterns or sexual activity can also change.

The above list of common reactions to trauma is by no means complete, but it illustrates the range of typical reactions. You may have feelings, thoughts, or experiences that you don't see listed here; this does not mean that your experience is abnormal; it means only that there are too many possible reactions to list them all here.

SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS CAN CHANGE FOLLOWING TRAUMA

Supportive people are a primary resource for healing after traumatic experiences. But trauma can challenge and change some or all of your existing relationships.

Even when you have supportive friends, family, partner, or work environment, you may still feel isolated. The people in your life may not know how to help you now. Old friends and family may not be able to understand what you are going through. They may themselves feel scared, confused, frustrated, or helpless. This can greatly increase your sense of loss. In Box 1.1 we offer a list of suggestions for how others

BOX 1.1. How Family and Close Friends Can Help Trauma Survivors

How do you express your support to someone who is reeling from a traumatic experience? There are things you can do for the other person as well as for yourself.

1. If your loved one has been threatened with physical harm or death, you can experience that as a trauma. Hearing about or seeing what your loved one survived can be very distressing to you. *Take care of yourself* or you will not be able to help the survivor. Get support for yourself from others, not the survivor. It is important for you to keep in touch with other friends, family members, or supportive people.
2. Get as much information as you can about trauma and its impact. Read or talk to a professional to gain a better understanding of the survivor's reactions.
3. Ask the survivor how you can be helpful, and then really try to do it. Everyone's response to trauma is different. Everyone's needs following trauma are different. Do not assume that you know what the survivor needs.
4. Try to stay available to the person. Follow their lead in conversation. Sometimes just making small talk about the "normal" things in life can be a great comfort. Listen should they want to talk about painful experiences; being able to just listen is a tremendous gift you can offer. Trauma survivors can feel isolated; having even one person who can be there with them significantly helps the healing.
5. Don't try to fix the person's problems, or make the feelings go away. The survivor is likely to think you cannot tolerate those feelings. He or she may then try to conceal them. This may create more distance in your relationship.
6. Help the survivor find other resources, such as a support group, psychotherapy, or relevant professionals in the community. If you know of someone who has had a similar experience, you might suggest the survivor speak with that person. There might be other supportive people in the survivor's existing social network with whom it might be helpful to talk (for example, a trusted friend or family member). Provide suggestions and offer to assist in any way you can, but don't push. Remember number 3 above, and don't assume you know better than the survivor what is needed.
7. If you do not live with the survivor, try to maintain some connection, even if it's just an occasional supportive phone call or note.
8. Try to be patient. Healing from trauma takes time.

can help. You can copy this and give it to whomever you wish. This list may also help you talk with those around you about how they can help.

You may find, however, that some people are uncomfortable with your distress, particularly if they are unaccustomed to seeing you that way. They may feel unable to comfort you. Sometimes, it helps to let others know you understand that they won't be able to take away your pain. Explaining that you need someone to listen to you or hold you, without offering advice, can help caring people help you better.

You may feel that some people no longer understand you, making it painful or uncomfortable to be around them. Some may not be able to provide the kind of support you are looking for. You may then feel a loss of connection or intimacy and want to withdraw from these or other relationships. It is OK to protect yourself from relationships that feel hurtful but try to preserve relationships that are generally safe and supportive. If you are struggling with a relationship, we suggest that you try talking to a friend or family member about it before pulling away. For instance, you could say, "I know you care and are really trying to help, but I just need some distance right now."

If you can, try to keep up the connections you have with others in whatever ways feel comfortable, whether it's an annual holiday card, a phone call, or going to a movie. It does not have to be a long conversation over dinner. Just let others know you appreciate their calls but aren't up to extended talks; this can help keep concerned people within reach until you are ready to reach out. You need to attend to your own needs and, as you will see later in this workbook, connecting with others is a basic need we all share.

CHECKING IN WITH YOURSELF

Reading through the possible posttrauma reactions in this chapter may have stirred uncomfortable feelings for you. Take the time now to "check in" with yourself. How do you feel right now? What do you need? Do you need comfort and a break from this work? If so, what are some of the self-care activities that you listed in the box provided in the Prologue? Try doing one of those right now, and come back to the workbook when you feel ready.

Why Check In with Yourself?

When feelings are uncomfortable, it's normal to want them to go away. Trying to ignore discomfort or distress is one way to do this. This solution, however, is only temporary and can cause bigger problems later. Distress can escalate and interfere with your day-to-day activities. Just as it is best to care for a cold so it doesn't turn into pneumonia, it is best to care for emotional distress before it creates bigger disruptions. The first step in reducing emotional distress is to recognize that it's there when it's still fairly mild. It's at this point that you can effectively reduce the distress by caring for yourself. But if you are in the habit of ignoring emotional discomfort,

you may not find it easy to notice. This is why, from time to time throughout this workbook, we will remind you to do it. Take the time for self-care as you notice the need. Learn to notice on your own when you need self-care and comfort.

How to Check In with Yourself

The ability to notice and recognize emotions is a skill. If noticing mild to moderate feelings of distress is a new skill for you, it will take practice. The more you do it, the better you will get. Box 1.2 lists the key steps for how to check in with yourself. Follow these steps now.

Did you notice any of the emotional or physical reactions described in the box? If so, do you need to find someone to talk to? Would listening to soothing music be helpful? Would a hot bath help? Or spending time outside gardening, or taking a walk? Relaxation or massage? Think about what resources might be available to you, or what might be helpful as you do the difficult work of healing.

BOX 1.2. How to Check In with Yourself

- ◆ Stop whatever you are doing. Be still and silent for a moment.
- ◆ Turn your attention to how your body feels.
- ◆ Notice any tension you are holding in your body. For example,
 - Tightness in your shoulders?
 - A knot in your stomach?
 - Clenching of your jaw?
 - Holding your breath?
 - Biting your nails?
- ◆ Notice any emotions you feel now, or felt while reading. For example, are you feeling:
 - Upset?
 - Sad?
 - Angry?
 - Lonely?
 - Frightened?
- ◆ Notice if your thoughts are racing or if it is difficult to stay focused.

If you have noticed any of the above emotional or physical reactions:

- ◆ Stop moving ahead in this workbook.
- ◆ Take steps to relieve any discomfort *before* moving ahead with the next section of the workbook.

LEARNING TO RELAX

Relaxation exercises can directly counteract physical tension in your muscles and calm you emotionally. But it is natural for different people to respond in different ways while trying to relax. Some trauma survivors feel vulnerable when relaxing, because the exercises typically suggest that you close your eyes and pay attention to internal images and sensations. It's all right to start by keeping your eyes open and be sure to find a safe place where you feel comfortable enough to relax. When first learning to relax, some people have a sensation of floating, light headedness, or other unexpected feeling. Try to continue relaxing through these feelings. Relaxing, like any other skill, takes practice. As you practice, you will be able to achieve that relaxed state more and more quickly and completely. Stick with it; don't be discouraged if it feels awkward or ineffective at first. This is a normal part of learning. Box 1.3 provides the steps for a useful relaxation exercise.

For most people, relaxation exercises are pleasant or neutral. However, if your traumatic experience included any kind of hypnosis or mind control, emotional invasion or brainwashing, you may want to read through the relaxation exercises before trying them as exercises. If for any reason they don't feel safe or comforting, you may want to modify them in some way, or skip them for now.

If you think it would be helpful, take the time to do the relaxation exercise in Box 1.3 now. First read and try to remember the sequence or speak the script slowly onto an audiotape, which you can replay each time you need to relax. You may also have someone whose voice or presence you find comforting read this onto an audiotape.

BOX 1.3. Relaxation/Visualization Script

This is going to be a time of complete relaxation. Make a conscious effort to relax as totally as possible. Get into a comfortable position and close your eyes. For the next few moments, concentrate on your breathing.

Try to see and feel your lungs, sensing how they feel as you breath in (*pause*) ... and feel them as they are completely expanded (*pause*) ... and exhale and sense how they feel as you release.

There is no right or wrong way to do what you are doing now. Whatever results you get are perfect results. And if all you do is relax, that is absolutely fine.

This is not a time to worry about any of the things that are happening in your day-to-day life. This is a time only for you. You are in control.

Now, once again, concentrate on your lungs. Picture them in your mind's eye. Inhale and see if you can imagine them filled with strengthening oxygen. And exhale and imagine them as you relax.

(cont.)

BOX 1.3 (cont.)

If your mind drifts away, just bring yourself slowly back to where you are or where you want to be. You are doing nothing wrong, and anything you do will be a success.

And now, in your mind's eye, you can see or hear a message, and the message is RELAX. All over, every cell of every bone, of muscle, nerve, organ, and skin tissue, feels a sense of melting into relaxation.

Now, bring your attention to your left foot and ankle, and as you inhale, gently flex your foot, and as you exhale, release and relax your foot.

Now bring your attention to your right foot and ankle, and as you inhale, gently flex your foot, and as you exhale, release and relax your foot.

Let all the cares of the day drain out through your feet.

And any noise you may hear will only deepen your relaxation.

And now, feeling the muscles of your left calf, inhale, contract the muscles of your left calf and exhale and let it relax.

And now, feeling the muscles of your right calf, inhale, contract those muscles, and exhale, letting them completely release.

And, of course, adjust your breathing rhythm to what is most comfortable for you, remembering to inhale relaxation, peace, and love for yourself, and to exhale tension and all the pressures of the day.

This is a learning process ... learning to relax ... learning to be at ease ... learning to be peaceful with yourself.

And now, bring your attention to the muscles of your left thigh, inhale and contract the muscles of your left thigh, and exhale, feeling relaxation pour in.

Bring your attention to the muscles of your right thigh, inhale and contract the muscles of your right thigh, and exhale, feeling release throughout both legs.

And now shift your focus to your behind, inhale and contract your behind, and exhale, letting your bottom relax.

And again, shift your focus to your stomach, inhale and contract your stomach, and exhale and let your stomach relax, relax, relax.

And now, bring your attention to your chest, inhale and feel your chest fill with oxygen. And as you exhale, release any tightness that may be there. Let all the tensions of the day just relax out.

And there's that feeling, that concept of relaxation consciously in your mind and body that is the sensation of relaxation.

Bring your attention to your hands. And as you inhale, close both your hands tightly, and as you exhale, release and let go. Let go of everything you are holding on to and relax.

You may open your palms to receive warmth and vitalizing energy. And feel the sense of relaxation move up through your hands, through your forearms, through your elbows, and up to your shoulders.

And focus attention on your shoulders, and as you inhale, contract your shoulders, hold, and as you exhale, feel all the tension that is there release out.

And feel the point between your shoulders, the base of your neck, and feel warm energy melting away any buildup of pressure that is there.

And feel this warm peaceful energy move up through your neck, feel your neck release. Your head is comfortably supported, and your neck relaxes completely.

And the muscles of your face now. Gently tense the muscles of your chin, your mouth, your nose, your cheeks, your eyes, and your forehead, and then let your entire face loosen and relax.

Let yourself be as relaxed as you now are. If there is any part of your body that is not completely relaxed, inhale now, and let any last bit of tension melt out as you exhale.

And if your attention drifts, that's fine, just as long as you are completely comfortable and relaxed.

Many things are changing in your body, all of which are normal and wonderful, just through your relaxation and visualization.

And now, imagine yourself at the top of a flight of 10 steps going down. You have been at the top of the stairs before, and you will be again. So this is completely familiar and feels safe to you. This is a time when you can just put your trust in the world. You may see these stairs as leading deeper into your self, to your inner place of peace and harmony. You will not be out of control in any way. You can trust. And everything is going to turn out exactly as you want it to.

And now, we are going to walk down these 10 steps, and with every step you take, you are going to relax just a little bit more.

And now, if you will, you may take the first step down. And with every step, your relaxation will continue to deepen.

And you may take another step down. And now you've taken two steps down.

(cont.)

BOX 1.3 (cont.)

And take another step down, relaxing just a little bit more with each step you take down.

And take another step down.

This is a time for relaxation. It is not necessary for you to go to sleep but if you want to that is fine. Or, if your mind drifts away, that's fine. Nothing that you do is wrong.

And so, take another step down. Feel relaxation flow throughout your body.

And now you are halfway down the stairs. You have five more steps to go.

And take another step down. And see yourself on the sixth step and see how comfortable you feel, and how secure you feel and how trusting you feel.

And take another step down. And there is the word RELAX shining right before you.

And take another step down. And you have taken eight steps toward total relaxation.

And take another step, and feel yourself completely release. You have taken nine steps with one more to go.

And now take the last step down, and you are all the way down to the bottom of the stairs. You are at your core of peace and comfort. If you want to, as you remain in a state of complete relaxation, picture yourself before a gently moving stream. The sound of the running water is comforting. And if you can, listen to the sound of the running water. Really try to hear it (*pause*) ... tinkling, gurgling, washing the rocks— And the sun is shining down on your body in a way that can't hurt you at all, keeping you toasty warm.

And feel a light breeze over your body and how soothing it is. You can hear the breeze as it moves through the trees, gently rustling their leaves. And hear the stream as it flows over the rocks.

And underneath your feet is the warm earth, and behind you is a rolling meadow, friendly, protective, and full of flowers in bloom. And now, while you are standing there, perhaps you can see yourself at a time when you were very happy, content, and secure. And feel that happiness, feel that security, that carefree feeling, and know that is you. And remember that any noise you hear will just relax you further. And you can call back this feeling of happiness and contentment anytime you want to. It is your feeling, your memory. The only one in the world who has that memory is you.

And now, see yourself at the bottom of the same flight of stairs you just came down; you are going to walk back up those stairs. When you reach the top of the stairs, you will open your eyes and be back at the place where you started, feeling completely alert, and at least as well as you felt when you started, and most likely, much better and much more relaxed.

And so take the first step up, take a deep breath in, hold it comfortably, and exhale.

And now, the second step up, still feeling relaxed. And the third step up, and another deep breath in, holding it comfortably, and exhale. And take a fourth step up, continuing to feel very at ease.

And take the fifth step up ... and you are halfway up ... take another deep breath in, and exhale as you continue coming back.

And now take the sixth step up, and continue with the seventh step up. Your breathing is even and relaxed.

And take the eighth step up, remembering that when you reach the tenth step, you will be back where you started, feeling completely alert and at least as well as you felt when you started and, most likely, much better. And so, take the ninth step up, with another breath in, and out, and take the tenth and last step up, holding on to your feeling of complete relaxation.

And you are back at the place where you started, feeling completely alert and at least as well as you felt when you started, and most likely, much better. You can open your eyes now, and bring yourself comfortably back....

Modified with permission from a script by Harold H. Benjamin, PhD, founder of The Wellness Community, an organization providing psychological, social, and emotional support for cancer patients and their families throughout the country. The National Training Center is located at 2716 Ocean Park Boulevard, Suite 1040, Santa Monica, California 90405.