

TWO



Ways of Coping After the Trauma

COPING: the successful struggle to overcome problems or difficulties.

IF TODAY the situation is not very satisfactory, but you have hope for tomorrow, you can live.

—SUICHI KATO

TO WISH to be well is a part of becoming well.

—SENECA, *Theodora*

By “coping” we mean any effort that makes a hardship easier to bear. The hardships we face may be minor, such as getting stuck in traffic, or they may be much more serious, such as a life-threatening injury. For trauma survivors, the hardships can extend beyond the event to the troubling reactions that follow. You may feel it is not possible to go on at times, yet you *are* finding ways to get through the day, the week, the months, and even the years. These are your ways of coping.

In the Prologue and Chapter 1, we described some specific ways to cope with the challenging feelings that could arise as you read this workbook. In this chapter, we invite you to think about the ways in which you usually cope with difficulties. Most of us learned ways to cope long ago and we may not have thought much about them since. It is quite possible to keep using these strategies without realizing that they don’t work anymore or have significant drawbacks. What do you do in a tight spot? Does it help? Does it harm you in any way? Would you like to find better alternatives?

People can cope by withdrawing, reaching out, blaming themselves or others, getting information, cleaning, exercising, relaxing, spending time in nature, drinking or using drugs, working, hurting themselves in some way, eating, sleeping, reading, or writing. Some of these coping efforts are clearly helpful; others have

drawbacks or are clearly harmful. Some may barely work, if they work now at all, but they continue to be used because at least one time in some context they worked and made sense. Coping strategies, however, can outlive their usefulness as a situation changes.

Later in this chapter, we describe ways of coping with stress that have been shown to work well. You may not have used these strategies before, but they could help you now. If you are using them already, it is valuable to recognize that you have resources you may not fully appreciate. The coping strategies we focus on in this chapter are primarily ways of managing the most difficult emotions that arise after trauma. It is difficult to think clearly when you are overwhelmed by emotion.

TRAUMA CAN DISRUPT HOW YOU COPE

You probably use different ways of coping for different situations. The choice of a particular coping tool may depend on how much stress you are under, how upset you are, how prepared or caught off-guard, how frightened you feel, or who else is involved. The more coping strategies you have, the better prepared you are for different situations. To cope well, it's best to have a tool kit filled with different tools, each designed for its own specific purpose. If one tool does not work well, it is good to be able to reach back in the box for another. Just as a hammer is not the best tool for all jobs, the same coping strategy will not work well in all situations. In fact, there are a number of jobs in which a hammer would do more harm than good.

Even so, people tend to use and reuse the same coping strategies. This becomes their coping pattern or coping style. Different people can have vastly different coping styles. For example, in a traffic jam, some people will honk, yell, and change lanes looking for a faster way around the jam. Others will use the time to listen to music or books on tape. Still others will make phone calls or just think. For each person, there is often a typical pattern. Approaching problems directly is one kind of pattern, whereas avoiding difficult issues for as long as possible is another. Other particular coping styles include tending to reach out to people for support; tending to pull away from others; making quick decisions and taking immediate action; taking a long time to consider options and weigh a decision. Despite coping patterns and preferences, most people can be fairly flexible in responding to the stresses and strains of everyday life. But the greater the stress, the more likely people are to fall back on what is most familiar.

✂ Dorothy's typical way of coping was to reach out to friends. She called friends when she felt down, needed advice, or wanted company. She was ecstatic when she finally got pregnant after trying for a long time. She immediately called several of her closest friends to share the good news. She talked to them about all the details, from the physical changes she was going through to her ideas for naming the baby. Dorothy was devastated when she had a miscarriage four months into the pregnancy. Again, she called her closest friends to tell them the sad news. She was

extremely upset for a long time, but she found comfort in her friends' kind words, caring, and willingness to talk about what happened.

Dorothy's existing style of coping worked for her when she most needed it. Reaching out to others for support is a helpful way to cope with stress. Other ways of coping, however, work well in some areas of life but not so well in others.

⌘ *Everyone saw Kevin as smart and articulate. His friends and coworkers admired his willingness to hold an opinion different from everyone else's and to fight for what he believed. The problem was that no one really felt like they knew him; he never joined them for drinks after work or for seeing a movie on the weekend. He spent most of his personal time at home. When his mother unexpectedly died, he took two weeks off from work and then returned to his normal work schedule. He never spoke with anyone about what happened or how he felt. He seemed okay but behind closed doors at home, he spent all his time in bed. He didn't shower or dress on the weekends, and he didn't answer concerned calls and notes from friends. He felt overwhelmed with sadness, loss, and loneliness, but he could not make himself reach out for the comfort that others wanted so much to offer.*

Kevin's independent coping style served him well at work but he did not know how to get emotional support when he most needed it. Kevin believed that "coping" meant always being able to handle something by himself. He thought that if he couldn't deal with a difficulty on his own, something must be wrong with him. The truth is that everyone, at some time, needs help from other people. It is normal to need help. Life is hard. Coping, in large part, is knowing when you need support, assistance, or care, and then knowing how or from whom you can get it. Sometimes ways of coping that worked very well before trauma suddenly stop working afterward.

⌘ *After Gabriel's car accident, he felt jumpy and anxious much of the time. He'd been a bit of a workaholic before—always working with his laptop at home on weekends, in the evenings. He used to find the absorption with work issues a respite from the chaos of family life but he just couldn't concentrate at home anymore. He finally discovered that it helped a lot to be more physically active. He started just by taking long walks.*

Coping can become even more difficult after a trauma when trying to meet one need, such as the need for safety, gets in the way of meeting other needs.

⌘ *Clara was a sophomore in college and frequently went out with friends. One evening, she was returning to her dormitory from a night class when she was sexually assaulted by a stranger. After that, she no longer felt safe going out after dark. This meant that she spent far less time with her friends and started feeling quite isolated. Her need to feel safe was limiting access to her main supports—her friends.*

○ No one should have to choose between two or more basic needs, such as being safe and having close friends. But traumatic experiences and their aftermath can seem to put you in just such a situation. When trauma makes it more difficult to get any basic need met—for safety, control, trust, self-esteem, or intimacy—its impact compounds, making things increasingly difficult over time. For Gabriel a first step to feeling better was to recognize that his way of coping was no longer working. There were other, better alternatives. How are you managing to get through your day? Does it have long-term costs? Do you wish you had other ways to make your life easier? If you haven't considered these questions before, the next section will help you do this.

IDENTIFYING YOUR WAYS OF COPING

The following is a list of coping strategies we created after speaking with survivors of a wide range of traumatic experiences. The list includes a variety of ways that the survivors tried to cope. Some methods are helpful, some outdated; some created new and different problems.

Go through the checklist and put a check mark next to any item that describes how you reacted, even once, to a difficult situation, whether minor or major. For instance, what did you do last time you had an upsetting fight with someone close to you? If the item is a way you *regularly* react, put two checks. Remember not to use your traumatic experience as an example but rather use other day-to-day situations that arise for you. Once you have gone through the list, look at the questions that follow. These will help you think about what you do to cope.

WAYS I COPE: CHECKLIST

- I confront the situation head on.
- I distance myself from the situation.
- I distance myself from myself.
- I control myself.
- I use relaxation techniques.
- I escape through dissociation or forgetting.
- I escape through abusing alcohol or other drugs (including prescription drugs).
- I act to take care of things myself.
- I become very aware of the needs and emotions of others.
- I learn or develop special skills.
- I call a friend.
- I call a supportive family member.

- I call an unsupportive friend or family member.
- I keep on trying and trying and trying.
- I become very tolerant.
- I try to get all the facts.
- I imagine the worst possible ending.
- I debate things within myself.
- I try to see the situation as positive.
- I see myself as bad.
- I see myself as a failure.
- I shame myself.
- I accept responsibility when appropriate.
- I create appropriate boundaries with other people.
- I create rigid boundaries.
- I give up my boundaries.
- I use fantasy to escape.
- I sleep.
- I become totally involved in taking care of someone else, not myself.
- I play down the seriousness of what is happening (minimize).
- I try to earn forgiveness for wrongdoing.
- I show a sense of humor.
- I do something creative.
- I turn to a higher source of wisdom (this could involve another person, a book, or a Higher Power).
- I dream.
- I trap myself.
- I make do with what I have.
- I plan.
- I watch television.
- I overwork.
- I do busywork.
- I educate myself.
- I abuse others.
- I neglect myself (poor diet, little exercise).
- I hold on to rigid or irrational beliefs.

- I find a physical release (walk, swim).
- I repeatedly hurt myself.
- I self-mutilate.
- I make suicidal threats or gestures.
- I attempt suicide.
- I do artwork.
- I write in a journal.
- I work at a hobby.
- I find a mission.
- I seek out a social situation.
- I talk with others about what happened.
- I find someone who will listen to me.
- I seek out emotional support.
- I find help to complete certain tasks.
- I find help with problem solving.
- I help others.
- I just don't think about it.
- I deny the impact of the event.
- I deny that the event even happened.
- I lose sight of the facts.
- I learn more about what happened.
- I blame myself.
- I split into alternate selves.
- I involve myself in daily tasks.
- I avoid daily tasks.
- I lie.
- I manipulate.
- I overcontrol myself.
- I lay guilt trips on others.
- I don't sleep.
- I overcontrol my environment.
- I create chaos around me.
- I become perfectionistic.
- I do criminal or illegal acts.

- I see the world in a negative light.
- I act in ways so others will see me negatively.
- I turn to my Higher Power.
- I turn to the safest person I know.
- I identify the sources of my fear.
- I express my anger without hurting myself or others.
- I become enraged and express anger in ways that can be hurtful or harmful to myself or others.
- I become addicted to relationships.
- I become overdependent.
- I develop a compulsive behavior.
- I develop an obsession.
- I do things to excess.
- I pray.
- I seek out others who have experienced the same thing.
- I go to therapy.
- I join a support group.
- I remind myself that things could be worse.
- I look for any sense of meaning that will help explain what happened.
- I decide I just won't be bothered by what happened.

Thinking about Your Coping Strategies

Go through the list again and look at the items you checked. If helpful, write them down on a separate piece of paper. The ones you checked twice are the strategies you use most in difficult situations. For each item checked, ask yourself:

- ◆ Does this strategy work? Does doing this improve things or make the situation easier? If it doesn't work, perhaps it is time to look for alternatives.
- ◆ If the way of coping works, does it have negative sides? Is there a cost to using this strategy? How high is the cost? Could there be less costly alternatives?
- ◆ When does the strategy work best? Does it always work or only sometimes? Before, during, or after a difficult situation arises? At any or all of these times? Perhaps a strategy will work best in one kind of situation but not others, or at a specific time but not others. Knowing this can help you determine when or when not to use a strategy. It is important to recognize the

ways your coping strategies work well for you, appreciating your strengths. We don't want you to forget what you are doing well when you focus on what you hope to change.

Think about all the items with two checks. Can you see any patterns? The following are some general coping styles. Do the items you checked match any of these?

Do you tend to take action, face things head on, and try to solve problems?

Do you tend to talk to somebody when you have difficulties?

Do you tend to lay low, avoiding or distancing yourself from problems?

Do you tend to keep difficulties to yourself?

Do you tend to choose strategies with harmful consequences?

Think about your ways of coping as you read the next section.

GUIDELINES FOR COPING EFFECTIVELY WITH STRESS

Research has shown that some ways of coping consistently work better than others for most people. Box 2.1 lists strategies shown to reduce the stress that accompanies change. These guidelines also help more generally to prevent, reduce, and manage stress. However, the stress of trauma can make many of these coping strategies seem impossible. For example, by itself trauma can make people less flexible. But by reading this book, you are already trying something new. You may be more flexible than you realize. Reading this book is also a way of "learning all you can" about trauma, how it has affected you, and what you can begin to do about it. Notice that these guidelines also say that sometimes the best way to move forward is to move slowly. "Take your time" means that it can be good to lie low for a while. These effective ways of coping are woven throughout this book. Consider them your basic tool kit.

In the rest of this chapter, we talk about coping in two areas where trauma can cause very stressful changes. First, trauma can disrupt your relationship with yourself. This includes how you think and feel about yourself and how you treat yourself. Feeling good about yourself makes it easier to face many of life's challenges. But feeling bad about yourself makes everything harder, including taking care of yourself. The next section talks about how to cope with negative feelings about yourself.

Trauma can also change how you think and act in the world and with other people. These changes can sometimes put you at risk for further harm and trauma. However, there are things you can do to stay safe out in the world. We discuss how to do that later in this chapter.

BOX 2.1. Effective Ways to Cope with Stress

- ◆ Be flexible, try new things, experiment.
- ◆ Learn all you can about what is going to happen.
- ◆ Plan ahead.
- ◆ Avoid impulsive changes.
- ◆ Exercise. Physical activity releases muscle tension and jitteriness.
- ◆ Break tasks into smaller, more manageable steps.
- ◆ Try not to change too many things at once especially when you are under stress.
- ◆ Pay attention to your reactions and feelings.
- ◆ Talk to others who have survived similar changes or experiences. Seek support from people who can listen to how you feel, offer feedback, or help in other ways.
- ◆ Allow yourself to grieve any losses that accompany the change; try not to downplay, minimize, or otherwise discount the impact on you. Even positive changes may have aspects of loss.
- ◆ Practice mindfulness meditation and/or relaxation exercises.
- ◆ Take physical care of yourself: get enough sleep, eat right, see your doctor and dentist for regular checkups and problems.
- ◆ Take your time.

Adapted from S. W. Osgood, *Abandon Yourself*. Washington, DC: National Institutes of Health, 1978; and C. M. Wheeler, *10 Simple Solutions to Stress*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2007.

COPING WITH NEGATIVE FEELINGS ABOUT YOURSELF

The emotional impact of trauma can be devastating. Two feelings in particular can feel overwhelming—self-hatred and shame. These feelings may be a direct result of what you have been told about your worth. They may result from being treated disrespectfully or from being repeatedly abused, discounted, ignored, or humiliated. These feelings can also result when you blame yourself for the trauma.

At the time of the trauma you may not have had control over what happened or how you felt. The danger may be gone, but it may not always feel that way. However, you can learn to shift your physical and emotional state. First, remind yourself that you are in a different time and place. Second, choose to find and then use ways to comfort and soothe yourself. Choose to do this even if you believe you don't deserve comfort. Not believing you deserve comfort and care is what many of the bad feelings are about. One key to self-comfort is to do it regardless of what you think about yourself at the time. Taking care of yourself may not come easily—it may be easier to take care of others—but if you are worn down or overwhelmed from not having cared for yourself, you will be less effective in caring for others.

The feelings you learn to evoke through self-comforting exercises are, in many ways, the opposite of those evoked by the trauma. You can learn to use them to help counter and manage negative feelings that now seem out of your control.

Knowing How to Comfort Yourself

Finding ways to comfort yourself may have been easy for you before the trauma; perhaps those techniques still work. If they don't work anymore or if you never had effective ways to self-comfort, try to find some now that will work for you. Have you tried any of the self-care tips in the Prologue? Have you tried the relaxation exercise in the previous chapter? Don't wait until you are upset to try one of these strategies; in fact, that is the hardest time to try something new. Try a new way to self-comfort now. If it is difficult for you to think about how to take care of yourself, consider what you would say or do for a friend in a similar circumstance. Then do that for yourself. A new golden rule could read: *Do for yourself as you would do for others.*

Can you now list three ways to self-comfort that work for you?

Use your answers as a plan for what to do when negative feelings threaten to overwhelm you. If you made a list of self-care activities in the Prologue, you can use those activities in the same way.

If you still cannot list self-comfort methods that work for you, consider putting this book aside while you find and try to practice some strategies. Reading this workbook could trigger painful, frightening, or overwhelming feelings. Before you go further in this book, it is important that you can protect yourself by having ways to cope with powerful feelings.

For some people, harming themselves brings a degree of comfort. If this is true for you, try not to judge yourself for this, but do begin to experiment with other ways to self-comfort. Try just one, perhaps a relaxation exercise, or listening to some of your favorite music. Any new strategy might take some practice before it works well. Stick with it if you believe it could be helpful and is not harming you. If you are concerned about harming yourself, we suggest that you consult a therapist who is familiar with the aftereffects of trauma. We also recommend the excellent book by Dusty Miller, *Women Who Hurt Themselves*. More information on both is given in the appendices. Seeking support and resources from other people is one of the guidelines for coping with stress listed in Box 2.1. This is what many other people do to cope, and it works. You don't have to tough it out alone. But when you do have ways to comfort yourself, the next step is knowing when to use them.

Knowing When to Self-Comfort: Paying Attention to Your Feelings and Reactions

Self-comforting can lessen the intensity of negative feelings and keep them from getting more intense. But to do this, you need to pay attention to your feelings and reactions. This is one of the recommended ways of coping with stress listed earlier. If you can allow yourself to notice negative feelings *before* they become overwhelming, you have an opportunity to keep them from getting worse. In Chapter 1, we explained how you can begin paying attention with the exercise “How to Check In with Yourself” (p. 20). The earlier you notice discomfort building, the sooner you can act to comfort yourself. This is, however, easier said than done.

When feelings are especially negative and uncomfortable, most people do not want to pay attention to them. Distracting yourself can be very effective for short periods of time. However, this strategy can cause new problems if it is used to stop negative feelings altogether or to never pay attention to them. You can't completely turn off feelings without paying a high price. The feelings can be temporarily put away, but they don't completely go away. If we do not acknowledge our feelings directly, they will get expressed indirectly. Unacknowledged feelings may result in our overreacting to minor difficulties or our becoming emotionally numb. When we turn off one feeling, the rest are affected as well. This can diminish intimacy in relationships; when we do not share our emotional lives, closeness suffers. Physical symptoms (headaches, muscle strain, ulcers, digestion problems) can also result. Even if avoiding feelings works most of the time, avoidance tends to fall apart just when feelings are at their worst and most overwhelming.

The solution we recommend is to allow yourself to feel discomfort when it is at a low intensity, before it becomes overwhelming. You can then use self-soothing strategies. These can give you some control and keep uncomfortable feelings from building. For example, trauma survivors often find that spending some time alone means being flooded by painful feelings and images. If this happens, you may avoid being alone—for good reason. However, if you have self-comforting strategies that work for you, you are not helpless. You have an important tool that can teach you to manage difficult emotions. It is a gift to be able to enjoy time alone. You can begin to reclaim that gift. Self-comforting is not about hiding or running away from negative feelings. It is about having choices.

Learning More about Your Relationship with Yourself

Are you aware of your own feelings—such as sadness, anger, happiness, satisfaction, frustration—either as they occur or some time later? Do you name these feelings for yourself or express them to others?

When do you become aware of your feelings? Do they have to be strong and powerful to get your attention?

Do you believe you have a good relationship with yourself?

How do you handle strong emotions?

Is how you feel and think about yourself constant? Or does it change, depending on whom you are with?

Do you ever experience feelings of shame and self-hatred? When?

What do you do to lessen those feelings?

What do you like about yourself?

Learning to Recognize and Use Dissociation

Many trauma survivors are familiar with dissociation. It is a coping skill used to manage overwhelming feelings. Some people with experience of repeated trauma, particularly during childhood, learn to dissociate early in life. Dissociation means emotional and mental escape when physical escape is not possible. Dissociation can mean not allowing the painful situation into conscious awareness. It might also mean blocking the trauma's emotional impact by mentally compartmental-

izing it. This allows survivors to detach from the traumatic event, helping them avoid its total impact. If you dissociate, you may lose time—time that you cannot account for or time during which you are uncertain of your actions. When an event is too overwhelming, or the feelings become too painful to tolerate, it is natural and self-protective to dissociate.

✂ *Whenever Sally thought about the way her brother had abused her when they were children, she felt light-headed and dizzy, and had difficulty focusing on the task or conversation at hand. As an adult, she still felt afraid whenever her brother was around even though the abuse had ended. She frequently had difficulty recalling all of the events and conversations that occurred when he was around. because she tended to feel blank and numb.*

You may have blocked off some aspects of your experience but remember others. You may still try to avoid emotions related to the traumatic events by dissociating, using drugs or alcohol, or by escaping into your work. It is normal not to want to feel pain associated with traumatic experiences. In the long run, however, uncontrolled dissociation interferes with your relationship with yourself. It gets in the way of enjoying time spent alone, comforting yourself, feeling good about yourself, or of tolerating strong feelings. Dissociation does not allow you the opportunity to develop alternatives. Even when you feel numb, blocked off parts of the trauma may limit your reactions and restrict your life choices. As mentioned earlier, shutting down negative feelings usually constricts positive feelings as well. Gradually opening yourself to feel pain can also open you to feeling joy in your life. Feeling anger can help generate energy to carry out healing projects or change unacceptable conditions. Your goal is to make dissociation a conscious choice.

Controlled or planned dissociation can be a resource. For example, when frightened, you may reduce your fear if you are able to withdraw to an imagined protected place. A planned dissociation can help you gain some control over your fear. The chosen safe place may be in direct contrast to a place of darkness or aloneness that you visited during the trauma. Some people use planned dissociation during medical exams by focusing on written material around the room or conjuring up an image of something pleasant. See Appendix A for more on taking care of yourself in medical settings.

Controlled dissociation is not useful if you always try to avoid feeling uncomfortable. There are other ways to regain comfort, but you will never find them if you only and always dissociate. In order to develop a stronger relationship with yourself, you have to be willing to tolerate feeling uncomfortable, even miserable, at times. It may be frightening to imagine letting yourself experience your feelings. In fact, you may believe that doing so would disrupt your day-to-day life. You are probably right if you mean suddenly giving up all dissociation. But that is not what we mean. Using self-comforting techniques can ease your way. Mindfulness practice—discussed next—can also help.

If others are not aware of your use of dissociation, you may believe that you

possess a secret that others must not discover. Your private knowledge may leave you feeling ashamed, isolated, or even crazy. If you experience struggles or feel stuck in this particular area, we recommend the book *Getting through the Day* by Nancy Napier, listed in Appendix B. A knowledgeable trauma therapist may also be a great help.

Do you believe you ever dissociate? If you think you do, try answering the following questions.

If you dissociate, are there particular times or situations when it occurs? When and where?

Can you ever control when and where you dissociate, or does it typically occur automatically?

If you dissociate, in what ways is it harmful? Helpful? Both?

Do you have a safe place inside yourself (for example, an image of an outdoor scene or other place, an image of yourself in a protective bubble, an image of yourself with someone who can protect you)?

Managing Emotions through Mindfulness

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.

—JON KABAT-ZINN, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*

In the 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn adapted Buddhist mindfulness meditation for use in his mindfulness-based stress reduction program. The program taught mindfulness techniques to patients suffering from a variety of physical illnesses. Since then mindfulness techniques have been used in a number of treatments for both physical and emotional health. Research has shown that they can be effective in reducing stress, managing difficult emotions, preventing relapse in depression, and improving overall well-being.

Mindfulness is a skill—it must first be learned and practiced if it is to help with difficult feelings. Its aim is to increase awareness of present, moment-to-moment experience. That may not sound like a good idea if you are in the grip of painful emotions, but such emotions are often about something in the past or future—not about your immediate present. Mindful awareness of the present can also be helpful because of its nonjudgmental quality and of where in the present moment you choose to direct your attention. It's best to begin practicing mindfulness when you are *not* in the midst of strong negative emotions. Once learned, however, mindfulness techniques can help you acknowledge uncomfortable emotions without being overwhelmed by them. Mindfulness can also enrich other more positive parts of your experience.

Mindfulness is about *how* you pay attention. As Jon Kabat-Zinn defines it in the above quote, the first guideline is to pay attention on purpose. In other words, it's about choosing to focus your attention on something. You can direct your attention internally to how your body feels or externally to what you are hearing or seeing. The second guideline is to focus attention on something right now, in the immediate present. The third guideline is to suspend judgments—no criticizing, especially of yourself, no evaluating anything as bad or even as good. The task is to simply observe, letting things be what they are—even if they are unpleasant. As we said before, this is a skill.

One important lesson that mindfulness can teach is about the true nature of thoughts and feelings. As we'll explain in the next chapter, thoughts and emotions are not facts. Feeling or thinking that you are a bad person does not mean you *are* a bad person. Thoughts and feelings are not proof that something is true. The content of a thought can hijack your attention but the thought itself—any thought—is only a mental event. In this sense, *all* thoughts are the same and mindfulness can teach us how to stand back and observe them. It can also help us stand back and observe our emotions so we do not get so caught up in them. Emotions can be powerful, compelling, unpleasant, or pleasant but they are only feelings and not facts. They will fade away on their own—and fade more quickly when we don't try to push them away. This takes practice. We recommend you start when you are feeling relatively well. Do not begin with strong negative emotions. An awareness that thoughts and feelings are temporary—just what you are experiencing in this moment—can help reduce your fear, anxiety, and despair. Mindfulness helps you notice your thoughts and feelings without taking them on and letting them define you. You can observe your self without judgment or criticism. Acceptance, including self-acceptance, is a powerful part of mindfulness.

One simple mindfulness exercise is to sit with your eyes closed and focus your attention on your breath going in and out of your nose. Pay attention to how the air feels as it moves through the nose, in and out, moment by moment. Do this, just this, for 10 minutes. If you try it for any length of time, you'll find out that it's actually very hard. Before you know it your attention has wandered. As soon as you realize this, gently and nonjudgmentally notice where your mind has wandered, and then bring your attention back to your breath. You'll need to repeat this many

times, every time you practice, and that's okay. Doing this is part of the practice; you are learning how to keep coming back into the present moment.

Trauma survivors can find it is easier to try mindfulness when they keep their eyes open and focus attention outside themselves. For example, you can light a candle and watch the flame, bringing your attention back to the flame whenever you notice that your attention has wandered.

You can find more information on mindfulness as well as instructions for trying it out in the book *The Mindful Way through Depression* listed in the self-care section of Appendix B. The book comes with a CD of helpful guided mindfulness exercises.

STAYING SAFE OUT IN THE WORLD

Coping with negative feelings is only one way to take care of yourself. Protecting yourself out in the world with other people may also be an issue for you. Traumatic experiences may have left you feeling powerless over what happens in your life. Trauma can undermine your sense of competence or faith in your own judgment. You may feel defeated about protecting yourself, particularly in new situations. You may think, "Why bother trying?," "It doesn't matter what I do," or "Nothing I do makes a difference." If you believe these statements, you may find yourself in a dangerous situation or in unhealthy relationships. However, you have choices. You can take steps to protect yourself in the world and with other people. Have you ever considered this before? If not, think about it now.

What do you do to keep yourself feeling safe in the world?

Do you have a safe place (for example, a room in your home, a friend's home, a place in nature, your therapist's office)?

If you believe that nothing you do can ensure your safety, you are unlikely to take steps to protect yourself. But there are a number of steps you can take to protect yourself from physical and emotional harm in the larger world. They are:

- ◆ Feeling emotional connection with other people
- ◆ Handling feedback from others without feeling devastated
- ◆ Anticipating consequences

- ◆ Having appropriate interpersonal boundaries
- ◆ Finding mutual (give and take) relationships

Feeling Emotional Connection with Other People

Part of being human is needing an inner sense of emotional connection with others. This is our basic need for intimacy, and we will talk about this need in more detail in Chapter 8. Following the trauma, you may find it difficult to hold on to a positive feeling of connection with supportive friends or therapists. The time when you most need support, understanding, and acceptance is sometimes the hardest time to seek it out. It may feel like no one else can possibly understand what you're going through, not even others who have shared a similar experience.

✂ *Andrea had several good friends with whom she enjoyed spending time. She often called them on the spur of the moment to get together. While on a business trip, she was mugged by a man who stole all of her jewelry and her briefcase, physically injuring her in the process. After this, she felt very fearful and seldom went out, other than to go to work. She stopped calling her friends and didn't respond to their numerous attempts to reach out to her. Andrea felt numb and unable to feel any of the warmth coming from her friends. She felt disconnected from all of her relationships, which left her feeling completely cut off.*

Andrea's terror overshadowed and crowded out her other feelings. Over time, she finally responded to one friend of hers who had experienced something similar years before. This felt like a safe initial connection with another person; Andrea believed that a friend who had been through a similar event would be more likely to understand what she was going through without judging her or pressuring her to do things she wasn't ready to do. This difficult first step helped her begin to reconnect with the people who cared about her and whom she also cherished.

There is a range of ways to help hold on to a sense of connection with others. One way is to let those closest to you read Chapter 1 of this workbook to help them make sense of your reactions. You could also copy and give them Box 1.1, "How Family and Close Friends Can Help Trauma Survivors."

It can also be difficult to hold on to a connection with others when you are by yourself or when someone cherished is far away. Photographs of the person you are thinking about can help you remember vividly a treasured time together or just help you feel as though that person is not so far away. Rereading letters from that person or even listening to a tape recording of that person's voice, if you are able to plan for a separation by making a tape, can help retrieve a sense of connection or closeness. Looking at or using a gift received from that person can also be helpful. Remembering good times spent together or even writing a note to that person, whether or not the person will ever receive it, can also help you feel closer to that person in his or her absence.

What do you do to hold on to a sense of connection with other people, even when they're not with you?

What other ways might also be helpful?

Handling Feedback from Others without Being Devastated

Traumatic experiences can leave you feeling raw and especially sensitive to comments others make. You may feel that something is wrong with you because of your reactions.

⊗ *Larry was shocked to learn that his coworker was killed in a car accident on her way home from work the night before. He remembered their last conversation vividly and could see a clear picture of her in his mind. Even a week later, it was impossible to do anything at work without thinking about her. He felt as though he was not returning to "business as usual" as quickly as his colleagues. When coworkers asked him about whether a certain project was finished, or whether he would be at a particular meeting, Larry felt angry and defensive. When people commented that he looked tired or upset, he quickly went into his office, closed the door, and dissolved into tears.*

The week after the death, a therapist from the community came in to allow Larry and others to talk about how their coworker's death was affecting them. Through the debriefing process, Larry learned that the other people in his office were suffering too. He heard them describe feelings very similar to his and he realized that their comments were not meant as judgments or attacks. He realized he had been misinterpreting nonverbal messages that actually reflected others' unspoken grief.

In the absence of information, it is natural to make assumptions about what another person thinks, feels, or intends. But such assumptions can prevent you from asking questions to learn more about what is really going on. It is helpful to assume that there are all kinds of influences on the other person that you might not know about. This may help buffer hurt, rejection, or other reactions that leave you feeling disconnected from others.

How does feedback from others affect your self-esteem or mood? How do you handle feedback from others?

Do you now experience feedback differently than you did before your traumatic experience(s)?

How do you react when others give you feedback that is positive?

How do you react when others give you feedback that is negative?

If you have trouble dealing with others' feedback, you will find more to help you in Chapter 7, "Valuing Yourself and Others."

Anticipating Consequences

As noted earlier, one effective and protective coping skill is the ability to anticipate consequences. This skill requires thinking ahead about what might result from a particular action you take.

⌘ *Megan tended to make plans at the last moment. She enjoyed having people over for impromptu gatherings, but her feelings were often hurt when people were unable to attend her functions. She saw their inability to attend as a personal rejection. Over time, she recognized that her spontaneous style had a drawback. If she really wanted people to come, she needed to plan ahead, so they could plan ahead. She learned to change. Sometimes she went back to her old ways, but she tried to remember that not everyone shared her spontaneous style. Those that didn't come probably weren't rejecting her at all; they simply had other commitments.*

And in another situation:

⌘ *Jose often went out with friends on the weekend. As long as he was with a large group, he always had someone to talk to and enjoyed himself. Several times when he went to a bar with just one other friend, however, he felt self-conscious and drank more than usual. The morning after such an evening, he always ended up regretting some of his behaviors and felt embarrassed.*

Some people have difficulty anticipating what the consequences of their actions will be. It can be tricky to think ahead to what might happen after you do

or say something. Thinking ahead is a skill. If you don't know how to do it now, you can learn by paying attention to your past experiences. What happened when you made certain decisions or took certain actions in the past? You can also learn more by observing or asking other people. You can benefit from another perspective and another person's experience. The first step for both Megan and Jose is recognizing that they keep getting hurt in certain types of situations. When they see this, they are in a position to figure out what they could do differently to get a different result.

If you don't feel comfortable discussing your problem or hurt feelings with another person, try this: When you notice that something isn't working, think through a past event but imagine it happening differently so that it turns out well. For example, Jose could imagine that things would have been different if two or three friends had come with him rather than just one. But what would have happened if he and the friend had gone to a movie rather than a bar? Where else could they have gone? What other things could they have done? Why limit his activities to a bar? What would have happened if he had said to the friend that he'd rather not drink? Perhaps they would have gone out and enjoyed each other's company in a setting where alcohol is not served. As Jose imagined these various scenarios, some felt more comfortable than others. Some seemed more fun than others. Jose can use all this information to plan ahead for new and better ways of being with himself and friends.

Do you tend to plan ahead? How is it helpful?

Have you noticed a time when not anticipating a consequence has created a problem for you?

Has your ability to anticipate consequences been affected by your traumatic experience(s)? How?

Maintaining Appropriate Interpersonal Boundaries

To have an interpersonal boundary is to know where you "end" and another person "begins." It also means knowing that you have a right to allow, or not allow, others to enter your physical or emotional space. Maintaining appropriate interpersonal

boundaries is an important self-protective coping skill. Figuring out comfortable and safe boundaries can be difficult for those who have experienced violations such as unwelcome touch, harassment, and emotional abuse. Such survivors may feel a loss of control that leaves them vulnerable to future violations. A natural and protective response is to withdraw from others. Withdrawing in order to be safe can work; but in the longer term, it can interfere with meeting other basic needs such as trust and intimacy. It's a challenge to trust and be open after a severe boundary violation. Trust and openness include risks. Taking risks is much more difficult after you've been hurt, and yet risks can enrich life as well. Chapter 6 includes a more detailed discussion of boundaries.

Finding Mutual Relationships

Another self-protective coping skill is being able to enter into mutual give-and-take relationships. Individuals who have been in relationships marked by significant power differences and abuse may not know their rights and therefore may not know how to develop equal and mutually respectful relationships. Abuse, degradation, and humiliation may seem normal, natural, or even deserved. Survivors of abuse may find themselves on one side or the other of an abusive relationship at different times.

⌘ *Marjorie was in an abusive marriage for many years. Her husband put her down, blamed her for the way he treated her, and convinced her that if she left him, no one else would want her. She finally confided in a friend that the abuse was getting worse and, with a lot of support, she left him. Marjorie was then surprised to find she was drawn to other men who treated her poorly. She struggled to state her opinions and express her feelings in relationships. She had to constantly remind herself to speak up, because it felt most natural to her to fade into the background, agreeing with whatever the other person said.*

And in another example:

⌘ *George appeared to his friends to be an effective and powerful man. As a child, and into his adulthood, his mother constantly cut him down and called his feelings and ideas "stupid" or "ridiculous." Despite his confident appearance, his mother's words always echoed in his mind. He felt emotionally isolated, even when surrounded by his wife, children, and friends. He created a protective shell to hide from his own overwhelming shame and sense of inadequacy and he tried to control those closest to him. His family and friends felt unable to share any of their feelings or ideas with him. He unknowingly and unwittingly re-created the same humiliating environment in which he was raised. It was painful for George when he recognized this pattern, but he was then able to change his style and participate in more mutual, less controlling relationships.*

Do you have close relationships?

Do your relationships tend to feel comfortably equal (for example, you support each other, you make decisions together, you don't intimidate each other intentionally)?

What do you do to establish and maintain give and take in your relationships in a way that feels fair and equal?

How has the equality in your relationships been affected by your traumatic experience?

A useful resource to learn more about how to recognize and state your rights in relationships is *Your Perfect Right*, listed in Appendix B under "Empowerment." This book distinguishes assertiveness from passivity and aggression, offering concrete suggestions for how to express your opinions and feelings effectively. We will discuss more about rights, power, and control in Chapter 6. Chapter 8, "Feeling Close to Others," can help you look, in detail, at your relationships and how you might help them become more mutual.

TIME OUT TO RELAX

Learning to relax during the day is a comparatively easy technique to learn. It is an important technique as you do the hard work of healing. Another relaxation exercise is given in Box 2.2. You may use this or any of the self-care exercises whenever you feel stressed or overwhelmed. Remember, the sooner you notice yourself starting to feel stressed and use a relaxation method (your own or one from this book), the easier it is to become relaxed.

BOX 2.2. Relaxation Exercise

1. Begin by sitting comfortably in a chair with both feet on the floor and rest your hands on your knees or on the arms of the chair.
2. Now roll your eyes up as though you are looking above and behind your head. Then close your eyes as you keep them rolled up. (This takes your attention away from whatever you have been thinking about because it is not the usual position for your eyes.)

Now you may do one or more of the following exercises. You may want to change any one of the images to make it more appropriate, personal, or soothing for you.

3. Imagine you are walking on a beach. You can feel the warm sand on your toes as you walk. You can see the waves spraying in the air. You can even hear the tumbling of the waves as you walk.
4. Now the sun is setting colorfully. You see a small boat coming toward the beach. As it touches the shore, someone you love steps out and comes to you.
5. You recognize that the person is a messenger for you. You are able to say anything you want to that person. You can ask for help or just be thankful that the person is there. You don't have to say anything. Perhaps the person brings a message to you. You can listen clearly to that message. Take your time with the messenger. You do not need to hurry.
6. When you are ready, you may leave your imaginary beach. You can open your eyes and speak. You feel that the time spent doing this exercise has been good for you.
7. You are now wide awake and ready to resume the activities of your day.

You may do this exercise as many times as you wish. You are in charge of the process.

This exercise is adapted from S. W. Osgood, *Abandon Yourself*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Mental Health, 1978.