

A STORY (05/2020) (Read this slowly)

Let me tell you a story.

It's a story about living through difficult things.

Part of it is *my* story.

Part of it is the story of the people who work here.

And maybe part of it—is *your* story?

What happens *after* a person goes through something really difficult?

How does it impact them? How do they change?

They start to hide feelings

The first thing they do is push emotions down, particularly fear and anger. They lock them in a vault and pretend they never happened. This is called *suppression* of emotions.

It helps people ignore pain.

They learn to rarely acknowledge suffering...even to themselves.

Suppression is aided by distraction

People learn to stay busy—mentally and physically. Trauma survivors are constantly in motion: bouncing their knees, biting their nails, or taking on countless projects. They use distraction as a tool to enhance suppression. Stillness feels uncomfortable because it undermines this.

They hate quiet.

Suppression can cause physical symptoms

Suppressing emotions is hard on the body. It affects the heart, the nerves, the blood vessels, and the skin. It can elevate blood pressure and cause stomach problems. It can cloud reason.

Suppressed anxiety and anger often result in physical symptoms and, over time, physical damage. Consider reading *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk for a thorough description of this phenomenon.

Control becomes everything

After something horrible, survivors make a silent promise to control things. Maintaining their feeling of control is critical because it fosters the illusion of safety. When you master everything, nothing can ever hurt you.

Others may see them as “control freaks” or “perfectionists,” but, the truth is, they don’t *want* to be in charge, they *don’t* enjoy it. In fact, they resent and deny the label. But in their bones, in their soul, they feel they *need* to be in charge...otherwise something bad may happen...again.

They develop “false” self-esteem

When distracted by new projects or helping others, they feel good about themselves. But this sensation doesn’t last long. They need continuous validation and near-constant positive feedback.

When they’re not busy sacrificing or receiving pats on the back, they question their value. They do not tolerate backslides, or even plateaus, in performance. When the world doesn’t notice them in a positive way, they begin to doubt themselves.

Control extends outward

It becomes their job to step in and fix everyone’s problems. Since they feel responsible for everything, bad outcomes are viewed as their fault. As life moves forward, they take on additional burdens—more situations, more people and their troubles.

Control leads to doubt and guilt

With this increasing sense of responsibility, there is a never-ending cascade of second-guessing. Analysis of past failures and future decisions reaches paralyzing levels. When the world rests on your shoulders, you become terrified of even taking a breath.

Guilt causes problems

They over-involve themselves in impossible situations. Sometimes, they do it willingly; other times, they are dragged into it. They are easily manipulated by bosses, friends, and family members—all playing on guilt and directing their behavior in obvious or subtle ways.

They get worn down by their inability to set limits.

Problems cause isolation

They end up feeling alone, like nobody cares about their needs. They are so busy taking care of the world it seems no one takes care of them.

They're tired.

Spent.

Disheartened.

They don't know to ask people for help.

They even fight with those trying to help them.

Loved ones lecture them.

"Why do you let people treat you like that?"

"Don't let everyone push your around!"

"Why do you keep doing this to yourself?"

But they give little weight to these statements. They are consumed by those who manipulate them and end up in conflict with those trying to break this pattern of over-involvement.

It's the perfect storm for decompensation.

Dislike leads to neglect

They numb pain and push performance. They *really* emphasize performance. They sacrifice long-term mental and physical health by pushing short-term accomplishments.

They isolate, and, in the end, fail to maintain themselves *and decline*.

Neglect leads to destruction

Their neglect eventually leads to decreasing performance. Life and responsibility wear them down. They respond to this backslide harshly, with anger and frustration at themselves. They try to drive themselves harder but they have already driven themselves into the ground.

Screaming at themselves doesn't do any good.

They use alcohol, caffeine, or worse, in a desperate attempt to boost productivity--trying to either catch up to their responsibilities or punish themselves for falling behind. Sometimes they don't know where a push for productivity ends and a punishment for failure begins.

Destruction leads to collapse

This recipe of physical and mental disregard continues—sometimes for years, until one day...they collapse, or snap. Maybe the suppressed emotion comes out through a loss of control or maybe they physically drop and can't go on. Whatever the outcome, the truth is...they're spent.

Done.

Lost.

They have no idea how to move forward.

There is a palpable darkness once they reach this place.

They begin to feel quicksand under their feet.

They doubt who they are, where they're going, and the value of their very existence.

They don't recognize this collapse's relationship to previous traumas

They attribute this collapse to poor performance or lack of effort. If you ask them about the past trauma, they may say they have dealt with it. A defensive response keeps the cycle going. They may say,

"That doesn't have anything to do with this."

"That's over."

"I've moved on."

They don't see how the pattern of over-reliance on suppression, over-extension of responsibility, and self-destruction leads to this predictable result.

Those old traumas live inside of them affecting every interaction, decision, and perception. They are present even as they try to rebuild their lives.

They try to rebuild and the cycle repeats

They stay down for a while.

Then something happens, something positive. And that false sense of self-esteem returns, and they start to chase it, chase it like a drug. And they slowly climb out of their pit for a time.

But trauma survivors are *more* likely to be re-traumatized.

Why?

Because they are so good at burying emotion, they struggle recognizing apprehension. By suppressing feelings, they ignore warnings. Boundaries become blurred and they fail to set limits—setting up for the next crash. This creates an exhausting pattern of repetition of past mistakes and perceived defeat.

But this isn't the end

That *is* the first part of your story, but *not* the end.

Here is how you change it.

A PLAN: 9 STEPS

MASTERING HYPERAROUSAL

FROM “TRIGGERED” to “The Rest of the Story”

- Step 1: Defining Trauma
- Step 2: Understanding Triggers
- Step 3: Minimizing Destructive Behavior and Maintaining Safety
- Step 4: Minimizing **Non-Therapeutic** Triggers
- Step 5: Giving a Framework of Treatment
- Steps 6 Getting Better
- Step 7: Reengagement in Relationships
- Step 8: Consolidation
- Step 9: The Rest of the Story

Step 1

Defining Trauma

What is a Trauma?

What is a traumatic event?

When people think of trauma they think of war and sexual assault. But what about being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease? Finding your spouse of thirty years has been leading a double life? Discovering you were adopted? What about a claustrophobic person locked in a closet or a person with schizophrenia believing Satan is in possession of their soul?

As you think about these incidents, you realize...

Trauma is Subjective

People experience events differently. It doesn't matter how others "see" it. What matters is how you *feel* it— both in the moment it's happening and how you respond over time to its memory after the event. That's what *really* matters.

Any of the following (and likely many others) could result in emotional trauma with lasting impact:

- Chronic interaction with a severely disturbed individual
- Receiving a terrible medical diagnosis (Dementia, Cancer, Multiple Sclerosis)
- Cognitive impairment or confusion. It's terrifying to not know where you are
- Disturbances in reality (hearing voices or paranoia)
- Discovering infidelity in a relationship
- Being forcibly exposed to a phobia (locked into closet if claustrophobic, hospitalization with a needle phobia)
- Losing contact with a loved one for a short or long period of time
- Verbal, emotional abuse (such as constant put downs, derogatory comments or control) from a significant person, even if not life threatening
- Struggling with socialization and being forced to difficult social situations (such as an autistic person who grew up in an environment with no sensitivity to their disorder)
- Addiction, dependence, or abuse of drugs or alcohol
- Experiences with legal system (such as being arrested, being sued or accused of something you did or did not do, or release after a long sentence)
- Divorce (with or without cause or justification)
- Relocation (with or without control)

- Loss of work and/or poverty, creating unstable future for self or loved ones
- Loss of hearing and sight, and the isolation it brings
- Gender Identity Disorder in a society where it is unacceptable

Trauma is Common

No one makes it through life without trauma.

Parents try to protect their children from it, but the truth is, they should prepare them for it. We've all been through something that has altered us.

We frequently survive experiences that would have terrified or killed our ancestors including accidents, medical procedures, and amusement rides.

We live longer and have more time to acquire painful memories.

Nobody makes it unscathed. We're all limping through life with scars from our past.

Trauma is Cumulative

We know that the more trauma someone endures, the more likely to have problems.

Imagine a child experiencing the following over a two year period:

- Being bullied at school.
- Enduring a significant illness.
- Watching parents go through a divorce.

Now imagine all of this happening in the just six-months. The second scenario is much more likely to cause problems because it increases a sense of powerlessness, which brings us to our next point.

Trauma Involves Control

The less perceived control someone has over a situation, the more traumatic it feels. This is *important* to remember. The most common trigger for most trauma survivors is a sense of loss of control.

In fact, one of the biggest coping skills from trauma is being hyper-controlling. It's a way of convincing yourself that nothing bad will ever happen again. But it also creates a rigidity that hampers the ability to use flexibility as a means of coping.

Trauma Elicits Intense Emotions

The *fight/flight/freeze* response is the most powerful emotion in human experience. Severe trauma elicits this in its greatest manifestation.

When dealing with this level of physiological activation, almost anything is possible. Some people act out. Others completely shut down.

Regardless of how they look, there is an emotional explosion inside of them and its taking a toll.

Aging Can Worsen Trauma

Aging in the modern world means slowly losing important things (functionality, friends, and loved ones). Most people slowly lose control over their lives as a natural course of aging. It's no surprise that this process can be difficult for the trauma survivor. They have built a life and world of control, and they slowly start to lose it.

Step 2

Understanding Triggers

Triggers Are Subjective

Understanding *triggers* is the next step in understanding trauma. Triggers, like trauma, are subjective. Some people may be triggered by authority figures, some by firecrackers, some by responsibility. Some triggers make sense, and some are random. For instance, we had one patient that hated *Old Spice* Cologne. She never knew why until recalling it was commonly worn by the person who abused her.

Knowing what sets you off is a first step at getting better. You need to learn what triggers you and how much it triggers you. This can minimize risk and assist recovery.

Journaling is very helpful. Rereading weekly journals will give you a lot of awareness of triggers. By watching and being aware, you start to get a better understanding of what things set you off and how much they set you off.

It helps set the stage for exposure...the cornerstone of treatment....we'll talk more about this later.

Triggers Are Cumulative

Once people have been exposed to enough trauma, they tend to get an *allergic-type* response to stress. If you are allergic to bees and get stung once every five years, then you'll probably survive. But—three stings in an hour...that could be deadly.

Triggers are like that. The more you get triggered, the closer the triggers are together, the more agitated you become, and the longer it takes to calm down.

This is powerful. It can significantly alter one's feelings and perceptions. Even small life events can have profound effects when occurring close together.

Triggers Often Involve Control

Control is one of the biggest triggers to survivors of trauma. This is why most people who have been through difficult events really struggle with aging, when control is decreased. Control is very sneaky. It can come up everywhere.

We have little control when we go to the dentist. We have little control when assisting our adult children. We have little control preventing the loss of others.

All these things, and many other seemingly insignificant challenges can slowly trigger a response in a trauma survivor. This is identified in a good axiom:

“Change is always hard but it's harder the tougher life has been.”

Triggers Elicit Intense Emotions

Triggers vary in severity. Some reactivate the entire trauma response, others partially elevate us. Unavoidable triggers that bring back a full *flight/fight/freeze* response are difficult to treat with medication. There is almost no amount of medication that can calm a person being terrorized in that moment. Imagine trying to medicate or calm someone while they are being held hostage or trying to place a mouse in a cage next to a cat and medicate it.

You have to respect the power of *severe* triggers and expose yourself to them only in therapeutic fashion.

Step 3

Minimizing Destructive Behavior and Maintaining Safety

People tend to be destructive when they feel bad. They yell. They break things. They smoke. They drink. They stay up late. They eat too much or stop eating altogether.

And they know on some level these behaviors will make them feel worse. But they still do them.

Maybe they're angry at themselves for struggling, thinking, *What's the use?*

Maybe they want control so badly, they choose destruction rather than accepting their lack of control.

Or maybe they're just looking for distractions, anything to stop them from focusing on how they feel ?

Whatever the cause, learning to avoid destructive impulses is one of the most important skills to learn.

When you can't be productive or proactive, avoid and minimize destruction.

This extends to an important discussion on safety and the importance of safety plans.

During intense emotional moments it can be hard to think rationally. But we can access routines that we have rehearsed previously.

Dial 911 in an emergency.

Stop, drop, and roll when on fire.

Count to ten when upset.

Take three deep breaths in an anxiety attack.

These are patterns we've learned so well that we don't have to think about them in crisis. We just do them. That's what a safety plan is for mental health, a set of routines, behaviors, people or cues that we can access to avoid destructive impulses. It is important to review them, commit them to automatic memory, so they'll be there to help when it's hard to be rational.

Avoiding destructive behavior also helps people to help you. Providers are able to focus on your symptoms more once your safety has been established. As an analogy, the surgeon can stitch you up faster if you can remain still.

Also once your symptoms improve, you can focus on positive things instead of picking up all of the pieces. Getting better is less daunting when the first thing you get to do is enjoy it rather than try to atone or make up for mistakes. So remember when you feel really terrible activate your safety plan and remember:

“I am going to feel better at some point. I may not be able to make that happen right now. In fact I think I’ve done everything I can to feel better right now. But what I can do is avoid being destructive. I will be happy I did so when I feel better.”

This is hard but important lesson for trauma survivors. Remember, stillness is uncomfortable.)They always feel they *need* to do something and this is magnified when they feel badly.

Passivity goes against their nature, particularly in crisis.

Intense feelings are natural.

Learning to control behavior is mandatory.

Get used to activating simple routines like safety plans when triggered.

Step 4

Minimizing Non-Therapeutic Severe Triggers

Once you understand triggers, you must try to minimize the severe, non-therapeutic exposure. Doing otherwise will hinder recovery and limit wellness.

Therapeutic exposure is a *good* thing. For instance, if you are triggered by supermarkets or being in crowds, we may ask you to place yourself in these situations and slowly get used to them. This is called *habituation*. The longer we are around low-level stressors, the less stressful they become. We become desensitized.

And sometimes exposure and mastery over your most severe memories can be very empowering. In fact, some of the most effective psychotherapies for trauma, *prolonged exposure* and *cognitive processing therapy*, work in this fashion.

If I can face this, if I can control my emotions and behavior while facing it, I can face anything. I may not be able to control the world or control others. But with these techniques I can control my emotional response to it.

We don't encourage over-exposure during times of crisis. Triggers, like traumas, are cumulative, so we would rather work on triggers when calm and work on them one at a time. An essential piece of recovery is appropriately addressing triggers when you are engaged in a helping process with providers.

Part of de-escalating from a severe hyper-arousal state is minimizing major triggers. This is why hospitalization (if that itself is not a trigger), changing location, or taking some time off work can be valuable to a person who is really on the edge.

Sometimes minimizing triggers and their repercussions can be as simple as pulling back a little when stressed out, setting better emotional and physical boundaries, and being mindful of your environment.

Minimizing non-therapeutic, severe trigger exposure means staying away from horrible, *avoidable* triggers. It also means not piling on too many moderate-level triggers at the same time.

Step 5

Giving a Framework of Treatment

Careful-Exposure to Triggers

Science shows us that exposure is the best treatment for the part of the brain that is damaged traumatic memory. Almost all psychological treatments involve exposure. They may vary in the amount of control or distraction used.

Prolonged Exposure Therapy and Cognitive Processing Therapy

These are some of the most effective treatments for *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*. They involve confronting and mastering our experiences of our most painful and intense memories.

But the benefit extends far beyond this initial mastery. In some ways they are examples of *radical acceptance*, a term used in mindfulness. If we can accept what happened to us, if we can control our emotions when facing it, then we can face almost any challenge in the future.

Other Exposure-Based Therapies

Eye Movement Desensitization Retraining (EMDR) - distracts you slightly while going through painful memories.

Group therapies - let you hear other versions of trauma instead of only relating your own.

Accelerated Resolution Therapy (ART) - minimizes the amount of trauma you share while allowing you to work on it.

Therapeutic exposure is the *key* to getting better. Careful, long-term exposure to triggers decreases their influence over us (desensitization). Continual, regulated exposure is a significant part of living long-term with trauma. It disables alarms in the mind we no longer need to respond to and helps us identify healthy reactions to future events.

During restoration in treatment, we want people outside of their comfort zone. This is where most gains are made.

Appropriate Medication and Avoiding Alcohol

Many anxious people try to use alcohol to help sleep or decrease anxiety. It works for a few hours but; unfortunately, in the long run, it actually agitates the system.

This is why people need to keep drinking to stay calm and why people get aggressive a few hours after starting to drink. And it's also why those shots of bourbon that may help people get to sleep seem to wear off in the middle of the night.

Calming agents (benzodiazepines, medical marijuana, muscle relaxers) must also be used with caution because they can may hinder the process of improving through exposure we discussed above. If they are used, we don't want them to interfere with exposure. We want them to increase exposure. We need some discomfort as people expose to situations.

Anti-depressants, mood-stabilizers, and antipsychotic medications may have roles depending on symptoms and severity. Sometimes co-occurring medical or psychiatric conditions (bipolar, substance use, add) need to be addressed with medication as well. Severely triggered, dangerous, or unstable patients are probably going to need some form of rapid stabilization.

Sometimes several medications in low dose are better than a single agent in high dose.

Medication should be used *with* psychotherapy, enhancing goals and progress

Structure, Structure, and More Structure

Live a structured life. Structure helps all human beings. It *really* helps anxiety. When you have fewer choices, you worry less, you *feel* like you have more control. Uncertainty drives anxiety into high gear. Therefore within reason try to do the following:

- *Wake at the same time*
- *Meditate at the same time*
- *Be active mentally at the same time*
- *Be active physically at the same time*
- *Eat at the time*
- *Go to bed at the same time*

Do these in a consistent way—not in an obsessional way. You don't have to have two eggs every morning at 8:14 AM, but it would serve you well to have a reasonable meal, consisting about the same size, near the same time each morning.

Structure helps your body's clock. It helps you digest your food because you know to turn on your stomach thirty minutes before dinner. It helps you concentrate at work because you always do mental work at 9:00 AM. It helps you avoid injury because you always exercise around 4:30 PM. And it helps you sleep because you go to bed at 10:00 PM.

Use structure to put your body in a rhythm you can count on. You'll be less anxious and more productive.

It is one of the important things you can do to live a healthy life.

Avoid "Excitement" as Your Definition of Happiness

The modern world has somewhat intentionally replaced "peace" with "excitement" as its definition of happiness because excited people are easier to manipulate by advertising.

In response to this, many seek a perpetual adrenaline rush in the form of video games, internet stimulation, intense personal interactions, and dramatic television to drive their sense of well-being.

Make a conscious effort to step *away* from this periodically throughout the day.

This roller coaster of emotion creates emotional havoc on our existence. It is brutal on trauma survivors.

Stop chasing perpetual excitement.

Excitement is the desert of good life.

Serenity is the meal.

Trauma survivors need more meals and few deserts. And, if you can't stop chasing the excitement, then at least purposefully add in more serenity. Go on more peaceful walks and meditations every day.

It will help put the excitement into perspective.

Understand and Improve Coping Skills

How can you deal with stress? We'll talk about three common ways: suppression, displacement, and mindfulness.

Learn these techniques.

Learn to recognize when you are using them.

A. Suppression

We've talked about suppression as pushing negativity down and focusing on functionality. In moderation, it is normal, healthy, and more effective when applied reasonably, within the framework here.

It's not healthy to perpetually suppress intense emotions to the point we forget everything we feel. It's a good, short-term technique to get through difficult moments.

But—it has some significant limitations and you need to understand those.

First, it hurts communication. When you are not acknowledging negativity, you don't communicate it. This will build silent resentment in relationships and deteriorate them over time. The gap in communication grows when you use too much suppression in your relationships.

Second, you have poor self-awareness. Since you don't acknowledge your frustration, fear, and anger, you never know how taxed you are. You push yourself to the physical and mental edge without knowing it. You're never quite sure when you are ready to collapse or explode...until you do one or both.

Third, it isolates you. People sense you pulling back. They begin to pull back from you. This is okay in the short-term because they stay away from you when you might explode. It's bad in long-term health of your relationships because you end up more alone.

If you're going to use suppression, you need to augment it with other techniques. You need to minimize its shortcomings.

Make a concentrated effort to :

- Intentionally take care of yourself even when you don't want to.

- Go back and apologize when you've over-reacted (see forgiveness and apology discussion below).

- Communicate *after* you calm down. Before you got triggered, you probably had a point, don't forget to go back and communicate in a reasonable way once you are calm.

B. Displacement

You can displace emotion, in other words, get it out, release it. There are healthy and unhealthy kinds of displacement.

1. Healthy Displacement

Push out negative emotion through exercise.

Write out negative feelings in a journal.

Cry on a friend's shoulder.

Let it out to your therapist.

2. Unhealthy Displacement

Punch a wall.

Scream at your family.

Scratch your skin.

Destroy your belongings.

It is easy to see, some of these are helpful. Some are harmful. Healthy *displacement* of emotion has a place, but you need to learn it appropriately.

It also is socially unacceptable to displace emotions in some settings. You can't go for a jog while at work, so this tool may not always be available to you in every form.

But you might schedule it...say go for a walk on your lunch break every day.

Remember, the *fight/flight/freeze* response is a *physical* response—it mandates action. And one way to deal with it is healthy and reasonable physical activity. Exercise may not be a healthy option for everyone. If exercise is not available, a release of adrenaline may also do the trick in the form of acupuncture, a cool shower, or even a massage.

Need for release is why people hit, cut, and scratch themselves. They are releasing adrenaline to give them control over their emotions. Be mindful to choose healthy forms of displacement.

C. Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a recent term for a very old technique. It is the process of moving *every* experience to an acceptable and even positive conclusion. It focuses on healthy perspective as an alternative to suffering. We realize this may sound impossible to some people who instantly and often think of their worst moments and cannot imagine a positive coming from the experience.

It can be used for *any* experience.

It is easier and requires less skill to deal with lower level stressors.

We'll give you some examples a little later but let's talk about several ways people achieve a mindful state: traditional meditation, transcendental medication, and cognitive-based mindfulness. They are not mutually exclusive, but some work better depending on the person and situation.

1. Traditional Meditation

Aspects of traditional meditation have existed for thousands of years. It focuses on breathing and calming the mind and body through control of respiration, to experience the world without judgment, attachment, or control.

The goal is not to empty the mind, but to still it, to fully embrace each breath with serenity and kindness, using non-judgment and observation skills that improve with practice. Of great significance toward contentment is achieving the state of a fully relaxed muscle body.

In time you can learn this approach through your day, so that a single breath can bring you back to a place of calm. This technique essentially harnesses hours of focus and discipline into a single breath that lets you embrace everything going on in that moment in a positive but non-controlling way.

2. Transcendental Meditation

This is similar, but rather than focusing on breathing, you focus on a *mantra*, a particular sound or short phrase that is repeated either out loud or in your mind.

It may be a sound with no English meaning...i.e. “Om”. Or it may be a phrase such as, “Life is positive when I am.” The technique has a similar effect to calm you over time particularly if you revisit it throughout your day.

3. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

For many of us in the busy, modern world, focus on breathing and mantras seems difficult. Our minds are “too busy” for serenity and lend themselves to obsessions. Triggered states make relaxation challenging. For these people, there may be another approach.

Rather than calming our body, we can direct our mind to a neutral, more desirable state. Using logical questioning and awareness, we can come to terms that not only is *calm* a more comfortable state, it is often the most powerful and most efficient.

This type of training allows you to examine your life, your emotions, and reactions, using the intellect to guide you rationally to a rational state by asking such questions,

“What am I feeling?”

“Does that emotion help me right now?”

What would happen if I simply accept this without emotion?

This consistent re-evaluation of your reactions to stressors assists you in identifying where change is beneficial and re-wires your brain to alternative ways of thinking.

In the end mastery of each of these techniques wind up in the same place...feeling calm, at peace, and in acceptance and appreciation of all you cannot control.

The Power of Mindfulness

Mindfulness crosses the continuity from illness to wellness. It can help us survive our most painful moments and appreciate our most precious.

It is universal. People of all levels of expertise, from all walks and stages of life, can practice it side by side without disruption.

And it is compatible and useful in a variety of value systems. It is simply a tool to fully become aware of your experiences in the most positive way possible.

When you become aware of this tool, several things become apparent:

You've already been using mindfulness

Remember when you were nervous about that presentation or the big game and instead of worrying about it you told yourself, *Enjoy this moment. Savor it.*

That was being mindful.

Remember when someone you care about was suffering and you took a moment to admire their courage and strength instead of only focusing on alleviating their suffering.

That was being mindful.

Some of your proudest moments were when you were thinking in this fashion and as you come to recognize it, you'll want to do it more.

People and readings you admire use a lot of mindfulness

Randy Pausch, the professor who used his terminal condition as an opportunity to give the best lecture of his life when he wrote, *The Last Lecture*.

Roberto Benigni's character in *Life is Beautiful* helped his son endure a Nazi concentration camp by enjoying it as a game.

John 14:27 *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. (Jesus Christ)*

"As you walk and eat and travel, be where you are. Otherwise you will miss most of your life." *Gautama Buddha*

"Nobody can hurt me without my permission." *Mahatma Gandhi*

"Seek refuge in the attitude of detachment and you will amass the wealth of spiritual awareness. The one who is motivated only by the desire for the fruits of their action, and anxious about the results, is miserable indeed." – *Bhagavad Gita*

Mindfulness changes others too

From Dr. Grace:

I was having a terrible day. I was angry and grumpy, stomping around like a bull in a china shop. I had to go into the bank to cancel a credit card that had been stolen and I gruffly started to push my way inside. A middle-aged man caught sight of me and my obvious irritability. He looked at me with compassion and responded to my anger with kindness and gently said to me, "Here, let me get the door for you."

I stomped through the threshold and stopped dead in my tracks...all of my anger suddenly gone. I turned to him and said, "Thank you."

He smiled and said, "You looked like someone that could use a door being opened for them."

*I almost teared up as I replied, "I **really** did. I'm sorry."*

"For what?" he answered. "You just gave me the opportunity to change someone's day. Thank you."

That is the power of mindfulness.

Your anger will never equal your compassion in its ability to change people for the better.

Forgiveness and Apology

Forgiveness and apologies are the work we do regarding the past, in order to stay mindful in the present.

Forgive everyone who has ever hurt you.

Apologize to everyone you have ever hurt.

Blame and guilt are not requirements for this process—only the exchange of pain for acceptance.

The apology is to acknowledge someone's suffering.

The forgiveness is to acknowledge your own.

What happens when we forgive someone?

- We hope they can have a true appreciation of all the pain they have been a part of in life.

- We hope they try to minimize this in the future.

Note: This may involve suffering. However, it is necessary and productive suffering. The greatest pain we feel in life is when we fully accept responsibility for suffering that

we have been connected with. Though it hurts badly, it inspires us to be better. And, in the end, we are thankful for this form of suffering.

When we forgive people we are often wishing productive suffering on them.

Emotional Support and Service Animals Can Be Helpful

Animals can provide assistance to trauma survivors in many important ways:

- *They provide structure:* Animals have a routine of meals, exercise, and activity. People will often guard their animals structure more than their own and thereby improve their own life's structure.

- *They can buffer social interactions:* Animals can make social interactions less intense and stressful by serving as a distraction or displacement of emotional interactions.

- *They can increase opportunity for socialization:* People may feel more comfortable engaging with people with animals.

- *They can recognize and respond to triggered states:* Service animals can be trained to recognize heightened states of arousal and calm survivors.

Spirituality Can Help

You should have spirituality, even if there isn't a God—and learn to meditate or pray even if nobody is listening.

If you don't believe in God, think of prayer as a discussion with the best version of yourself... the person that you wish to be. Have frequent conversations with that side of yourself, seek your own best advice. Developing yourself spiritually is a tether to re-composure.

Step 6

Getting Better -- a Balance (More Complicated Than You Think)

Just as trauma is dimensional, recovery is multi-faceted. There are five ways that someone can improve:

- They can have less symptoms.
- They can have greater functioning.
- They can have better insight.
- They can be on less medication.
- They can be more stable.

Patients tend to focus on symptoms and functioning but sometimes they end up on too many medications while chasing performance, like athletes willing to sacrifice their health for better results. In the long run, they may be risking stability for a short-term increases in functioning.

Step 7

Re-engagement in Relationships

Relationships will always be a problem. Even the healthiest trauma survivors struggle with them.

Why?

Usually overreaction is the cause. When people have been hurt badly, they tend to be overly sensitive to small hurts, and when they over-react, they lose communication skills.

Communication has to be at an appropriate emotional level. If you accidentally bump into someone and they are annoyed, you feel compelled to apologize. If they start screaming at a small slight, their over-reaction becomes the new focus. Trauma survivors often lose communication because of their over-reactions.

They need to learn to not to attempt too much communication when highly triggered. There is too much intensity and suppression. They are better off waiting and returning to communication when calm.

But...they have to remember to return to appropriate communication otherwise resentment builds.

All that being said, these skills are designed to help the re-engagement process.

Step 8

Consolidation & Taking Some Time Away

Sometimes it is important to take some time away from intense therapy. Consolidate your gains and realize that *you* are the one who has done most of the work and that work should go with you.

Step 9

The Rest of the Story (Understanding the Cycle)

You will forget and rediscover every part of this story throughout life. Each time you rediscover it, you will promise yourself that you will *never* forget it. But— you will. Eventually...

You'll take on too much...

You'll get triggered stressors...

You'll chase functionality at the cost of stability...

You'll overestimate your capabilities...

You will use *suppression* and call it *mindfulness*.

But the more you embrace this cycle the healthier you will be.

Serenity is a winding path.

Peace needs to be rediscovered.

Mental health is a process of repetition.

And you will inspire others by doing so. Every day people lose and find this path, helping others along the way—that is what is best in humanity.

What is the meaning of life?

It is to maintain compassion for ourselves and others while we struggle. The greater our personal struggle, the more we can inspire others by offering compassion through it.

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End Note

The purpose of this is not to say that *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* is the only mental health diagnosis, but rather to acknowledge that emotional trauma is a critical component to nearly all mental illness, similar to fever being a constant concern in the management of infection.

We survive and are exposed to infinitely greater amount of emotional trauma than our ancestors. Understanding the process of *surviving* and *enduring* may be the most critical aspect of mental health care moving forward.