

A STORY (06/25/2018) (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 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 suppression.

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 judgment and clear thinking.

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 the feeling of control is critical because it fosters the illusion of safety. When you master everything, nothing can ever hurt you.

Others often see trauma survivors 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

labels often attached to them. 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 starting new projects or helping others, they feel good about themselves. But this false worthiness doesn't last long. They soon need further validation and near-constant positive feedback.

When they're not busy sacrificing or receiving pats on the back, they question their basic value. They do not tolerate backslides, or even plateaus, in performance. When the world doesn't notice them in a positive way, they doubt and dislike 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 always viewed somehow as their fault. As life moves forward, they take on additional burdens...more situations...more people and their troubles.

Control leads to 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 their 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, and it seems no one takes care of them.

They're tired. Spent. Disheartened. They don't know to ask people for help.

They only know how to help others. 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 their pattern of over involvement.

It's the perfect storm for decompensating.

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 after fatigue sets in. 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 driven themselves into the ground.

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. 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 others out and 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 victims are *more* likely to be re-traumatized.

Why?

They're 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: 15 STEPS

CALMING DOWN A SEVERE **HYPER-ALERT EVENT**
FROM A “TRIGGERED” state to “The Rest of the Story”

- Step 1: Defining Trauma
- Step 2: Understanding Triggers
- Step 3: Minimizing Severe Trigger Exposure
- Step 4: Minimizing Destructive Behavior
- Step 5: Encouraging Healthy Release of Emotion
- Step 6: Why Medication?
- Step 7: Giving a Framework of Treatment
- Steps 8-12: Getting Better
 - Exposure to moderate triggers in treatment
 - Improvement of Symptoms
 - Improvement of Function
 - Reduction of Medication
 - Increased Stabilization
- Step 13: Reengagement in Relationships
- Step 14: Consolidation: Taking some time away from therapy
- Step 15: 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, parents should prepare them for it. We've all been through something that has altered us.

We live in a world where most survive traumas and experiences that our ancestors would have perished from or never experienced at all. We survive car accidents, endure medical procedures, see the end of twenty-year relationships we thought would last forever. In other words, we *survive* a lot more than our ancestors did. We also live much longer. We have to learn to live with a lot of baggage and a high level of uncertainty by the time we reach the end of our lives

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 traumas are to cause long-standing problems. Imagine a child experiencing the following over two years:

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

Now imagine them overlapping in the same six-month window. 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 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 temporary 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. It also creates a rigidness that hampers the ability to use flexibility as a means of coping—none of it exercised through deliberate or conscious means.

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. It can become a seemingly uncontrollable level of agitation and excitement. People feel like a caged, angry animal. Fear is often masked through a variety of emotional responses that reinforce the problematic cycle. The role of anger and fear is re-cast into unhealthy reactions to oneself, to others, and to the world around them.

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.

Self-awareness is helpful.

Mindfulness is very helpful. We'll talk about this more 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 or doctor.

We have little control when assisting our adult children.

We have little control preventing the loss of our friends and families.

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. 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.

We once had a patient who was raped by a coworker. She suffered nightmares, flashbacks, and panic attacks from the event. No charges were filed and both parties remained at the same employer. But they were in separate departments and never saw each other. She came in one day and informed us that she had been transferred to *his* department and would be working next to him.

“How am I going to do that without crawling out of my skin?” She asked.

“That’s impossible,” I replied. “Imagine putting a mouse in a cage right next to a cat. Now imagine trying to give that mouse enough medication to sleep there. There is no amount of medication or therapy that is going to allow you to tolerate that trigger *at this time* with your current symptoms. You’re asking too much of your treatment.”

She didn’t believe me.

She ended up with a lot of visits and a lot of medications over the next three months. Eventually, she left for another department... and she got better.

You have to respect the power of *severe* triggers in your present. Some things you just *have* to stay away from when you’re not doing well.

Step 3: Minimizing Severe Trigger Exposure

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

Sometimes exposure can be 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.

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 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 4: Minimizing Destructive Behavior

People tend to be destructive when they feel bad. They yell. They break things. They drink. They stay up late. They eat too much or not at

They know these will make them worse. But they still do them.

Maybe they're so angry at themselves for struggling they think, "What's the use?" Or they want control so badly, they will choose control over their destruction over no control in another situation. When you can't do something productive: **DO NOTHING**. This is hard for trauma survivors. (Remember that stillness is uncomfortable.) They always feel they need to do something when they feel bad. In fact, doing *nothing* is better than doing something destructive. This is an important fact to remember.

Self-destructive feelings are understandable and common. But if we can avoid self-destructive action, we lessen the impact and consequences of the feelings. There is simply less to "undo" in the recovery process when there is not destructive action.

Intense feelings are natural.

Learning to control behavior is mandatory.

Getting you better and keeping you safe are *not* the same thing. When we're focused on controlling dangerous behavior, we lose sight of improvement. If you can keep yourself safe by not acting on destructive impulses, we can focus entirely on getting you better. Safety is always primary.

Not being destructive gets you better faster. So, once your mood improves, you can focus on enjoying it rather than picking up pieces. Getting better is less daunting when the first thing you get to do is enjoy it rather than try to atone for mistakes.

Get used to doing nothing when triggered is imperative, because limited action is probably the *best* action for a severely triggered person.

Step 5: Healthy Release of Emotion

The *fight/flight/freeze* response brought by trauma and triggers is a *physical* response—it unavoidably mandates action. The best way to deal with it is healthy and reasonable physical activity. This is why some people exercise when stressed. Exercise is useful in bringing down a triggered state.

Exercise may not be a healthy option for everyone. If exercise is not available, a large release of adrenaline may also do the trick in the form of acupuncture, a cool swim or shower, or maybe a massage. Dr. Grace frequently swims in the 74° springs after work as way to release the stress of the day. 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 non-triggering forms of release.

Step 6: Why Medication?

Low Dose Polypharmacy

Medication or psychotherapy for trauma? Which should come first? Is one medication better or multiple medications?

A lot of this depends on how bad people are at the time and what are the goals. Severely triggered patients are probably going to need some calming down to contribute to therapy.

If medications are used, several in low doses may be better option than a single agent in a high dose.

Early, low-dose, *rational* polypharmacy (use of multiple medications together) may be a better option to step-wise escalation of agent after agent. In other words, *simultaneously* starting several medications that are often highly effective at *low* doses because they work together.

This is based on the enormity of the *fight/flight/freeze* response.

Some combination of these medications early in the triggered cycle may be a better pharmacological solution and allow people to do the exposure work necessary.

We are looking to calm, allow moderate exposure, and avoid sedation.

All of the following have shown some benefits (short or long-term) and some harm in trauma-related anxiety.

Antidepressants

Anticonvulsants

Alpha Agents

Antipsychotics

Benzodiazepines

Medical Marijuana

Some combination of these medications early in the triggered cycle is a better pharmacological solution. Once people are calm, they may start to *feel* medicated (provided they don't take on more stressors or triggers).

Step 7: Giving a Framework of Treatment

We'll start implementing a framework for a better life. It is a fact that the strongest factor driving change in the brain is one's behavior. Therefore, what you do is just as important as what you think and what you feel.

It will involve an understanding of triggers, cycles, and the following components below which have helped countless patients. Education is essential to understanding trauma processes and understanding yourself. Knowledge is power when it is utilized, and it works in conjunction with medication.

Structure, Structure, and More Structure

We'll tell you to 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:

- 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 replaced “peace” with “excitement” as its definition of happiness. We seek a perpetual adrenaline rush in the form of video games, internet stimulation, intense personal interactions, and dramatic television.

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 very few deserts.

Learn and Understand Coping Skills

How can you deal with stress? We'll talk about three ways: suppression, displacement, and mindfulness. Understand these techniques. Use them appropriately.

Suppression

We've talked about suppression as the pushing negativity down and focusing on functionality. It's a good, short-term technique that helps you get through a rocky time. But it has some significant limitations.

First, it hurts communication. When you are not acknowledging negativity, you will not 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.

If you're going to use suppression, you need to augment it with maintenance. Intentionally, take care of yourself and your relationships. Go back and apologize. Communicate *after* you calm down.

Displacement

You can displace emotion, in other words, get it out. 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.

As 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 your tools may not always be available to you.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is trendy term for a very old technique with a modern spin. It is the process of re-wiring the brain by transforming every experience to an acceptable 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.

There are really several ways to achieve a mindful state of peace (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

Traditional meditation focuses on breathing and calming the mind and body through control of its respiration. The goal is not to empty the mind, but to still it. Meditation also focuses on fully embracing each moment and each breath with serenity and kindness, using nonjudgment 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 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 as, "What am I feeling?" and "Does that emotion help me right now?" This consistent re-evaluation of your reactions to stressors assists you in identifying where change is beneficial, and re-wires your brain to alternative conclusions. Neuroplasticity of the brain allows this process in everyone.

In the end you often wind up in the same place...feeling calm and in control of your emotions. Mindfulness allows you to use your purposeful thoughts to get there. Kindness and calmness is almost always the best road.

The Power of Mindfulness

Mindfulness crosses the continuity from illness to wellness seamlessly. It can help us survive our most painful moments and help us appreciate our most precious, simply by thinking about what we're thinking about. It can help us to a better life and then help us enjoy that life to the fullest. The novice and the master can practice it side by side without disruption and the drug addict and business executive can find utility in it in the same day. It is a tool to fully become aware of your experiences in the most positive way possible.

When you become aware of this tool, three things happen:

1. You realize that you have used mindfulness to some extent throughout your life. You realize that most of your proudest moments were when you were thinking in this fashion.
2. You realize the people that you admire most in life think mindfully most of the time.
3. You notice the power it has throughout your days.

MBCT (Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy) is an approach that assists the provider in helping the patient move purposefully through the mess of trauma and anxiety in a way that produces specific and measurable change.

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 as 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.

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?

1. We hope they can have a true appreciation of all the pain they have been a part of in life.
2. 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 party to. Though it hurts badly, it inspires us to be better. And, in the end, we are thankful for this form of suffering.

Example: you were driving the car when a distracted driver rear-ended you, leaving you and your passenger with significant lifelong injuries. In the aftermath, you will benefit greatly if:

1. You apologize to your passenger.

Even though you did nothing wrong, you can acknowledge the pain they felt while you were there. And most important, the apology has to be on the magnitude of the pain, *not* on your level of involvement. You can't say, "Well, it wasn't really *my* fault, but I'm sorry you got hurt."

Instead it should sound more like, "I'm *so* sorry this happened to you while I was driving."

You don't have to feel guilty. This isn't about hurting you. It's about appreciating their suffering and your connection to it.

2. You need to forgive yourself.

You are associated with the pain. You will be angry at yourself. Even if you made mistakes, even if you contributed, you must forgive yourself to move forward, regardless of the consequences.

In truth, you cannot even appreciate the full magnitude of the consequences of your actions *unless* you forgive yourself. Only when we

allow ourselves mistakes do we allow ourselves to see the full impact of them.

3. You need to forgive your passenger.

This may seem strange, but your passenger hurts you. Your passenger was there when it happened to you.

They will remind you of the incident every time you see them. Their *suffering* will hurt you. You need to forgive them for hurting you.

4. You need to forgive the driver that rear-ended you.

This is obvious but very difficult. But remember, by forgiving them you are hoping they gain appreciation of their action, remorse, and desire to do better. In truth this will likely cause them suffering, but it will be constructive suffering.

Over-controlling people need to start every day forgiving themselves for not saving the world. And maybe repeat it a few times throughout the day. This is a key component to good self-care and building of a healthy self-concept.

The nature of what creates a trauma often conflicts with the ability to let go (and the distortion that control is safe). Forgiveness provides a soft place to begin this work of healing. Trauma often results in us forgetting to be kind to ourselves and to others.

Dr. Grace's mantra:

"I'm just a scared little man, without a plan, doing the best I can."

Stay Busy in a Healthy Way

In moderation, suppression of emotion through activity is normal, but not always helpful. It is more effective when applied in the *reasonable* way, within the framework here. It's not healthy to suppress through a panic-driven frenzy that helps forget everything we feel.

Careful-Exposure to Moderate Triggers

Almost all psychological treatments involve exposure. They vary in the amount of control or distraction used while trauma survivors are exposed to their triggers and traumatic memories. Science shows that exposure and experience is the language best understood by the part of the brain that is activated in traumatic memory. Most types of cognitive therapies help minimize activated responses:

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

- Group therapies let you hear other versions of trauma instead of only relating your own.
- Accelerated Response Therapy (ART) minimizes the amount of trauma you share while allowing you to work on it.

Exposure is the key to getting better.

Why did we put it down here, after all of this other stuff, if it is the key to getting better?

Because for very ill people, it can be hard to get it right. Remember, we want low level exposure and discomfort. We **don't** want people freaking out, hyper triggering their fight or flight, and suppressing their emotions to the point of becoming robotic.

Careful, long-term exposure to moderate 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 slightly outside of their comfort zone. This is where most gains are made.

In the future we hope to have a measure of this (see Heart Rate Variability Discussion) below.

Emotional Support Animals are Helpful

I used to believe that emotional support animals were a waste of time. I became a believer when I saw a patient at a grocery store with her support dog. Until that dog, she hadn't left her house in almost eight years. Since then I have come to respect the *incredible* impact support animals have on trauma survivors.

Medications, therapy, modern technology—all humbled by a four-legged friend. Dealing with people and intense emotions is the hardest thing for survivors. The emotional quotient of dogs is very high, higher than some humans. They help trauma survivors in so many ways.

They help people recognize when they feel awful, provide structure by requiring daily activities, and increase opportunity for socialization. People are generally friendlier and more engaging to those with animals. Animals provide emotional support and courage to go places people may avoid going alone.

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 inside of you that you wish to be. It is never a bad idea to have frequent conversations with the best version of ourselves we can imagine.

Calm, serene thinking lends itself to the benefits of spirituality. As you progress in your treatment and thinking improves, you are able to realize these possibilities in a new way:

Letting go of what you cannot control

Letting go of anger

Embracing serenity and peace despite a chaotic world

Treating others with respect

Realizing and developing belief in your inherent worth.

These are things many wise people have been encouraging for a long time. They are just as important today, and those messages will mean more when your mind is receptive. Developing yourself spiritually is a tether to re-composure.

The Future?

As we said we want you a little uncomfortable and exposing to moderate triggers while you have support and introduction of tool to help you succeed.

But what is, "A little uncomfortable?"

We are searching for biomarkers for hyperarousal and sedation, measures of human physiology that give us hard numbers on anxiety state and cognitive sedation so we can maximize therapy efficacy.

Our office is looking at Heart Rate Variability to measure hyperarousal and considering Electroencephalograms to measure sedation for this goal.

Steps 8-12: Getting Better -- a Balance (More Complicated Than You Think)

No single step is more important than any of the others. It is critical to think of *all* of these things as you begin to improve. Just as trauma is dimensional, recovery is multi-faceted. There are five ways that someone can improve:

- 1.They can have less symptoms.
- 2.They can have greater functioning.
- 3.They can have better insight.
- 4.They can be on less medication.

5.They can be more stable.

People tend to focus on symptoms rather than functioning. Sometimes they end up on too many medications while chasing performance, like athletes willing to sacrifice their health for better results.

As you start to get better, keep these *five* aspects of improvement in mind. Rather than pushing your performance, it may be a time to focus on stability or reduce medications.

Step 13: Re-engagement in Relationships

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

Why? Overreaction to negative feedback (real or imagined).

When people have been hurt badly by life, they over-react to small things. When people over-react, they lose the ability to communicate effectively.

Trauma survivors *never* communicate effectively when triggered. There is too much intensity and suppression. They are better off waiting and returning to communication when calm. This validates the importance of doing *nothing* when triggered. It is just one constant theme in understanding relationships' affiliation to trauma.

Step 14: Consolidation & Taking Some Time Away

People hate this step.

I think it is important.

It is important to take some time away from the office associated with your improvement. Work with another provider. See another therapist.

Why? Why on earth would we recommend leaving a good provider who has helped you? There are two vital reasons: you need to consolidate your gains and realize that *you* are the one who has done most of the work... nothing can take that away, even losing your guide.

If we have done our job, you'll realize that you can help yourself out of the woods, even if we aren't available. You need to practice that skill as well.

So after you are feeling better, we'll ask you to leave us for at least six months. Remember this conversation, and why we believe in it.

Step 15: The Rest of the Story (Understanding the Cycle)

You will forget and rediscover every part of this story through life. Each time you rediscover it, you will promise yourself that you will never forget it... but you *will* forget.

You'll take on too much. You'll get triggered by losses and stressors. You will chase functionality at the cost of stability. You'll underestimate the challenges you face. You will use *suppression* and call it *mindfulness*.

The more you embrace this cycle, the healthier you will be. Eventually, seeing it throughout every day, being okay while you struggle back to peace. Serenity is a winding path. It always needs to be found again. Mental health, like physical health, is a *process* that needs repetition.

Life can do *anything* to you, but it doesn't control your responses. Life cannot *make* you angry, afraid, sad, or happy. Only *you* can do that. You give events power over you and *you* can take that power back. Learning the difference between *feeling* and *being* is elemental to long-term stability.

As you age, you may lose *everything*: everything you've acquired, everything you've built, and everything you've known on this Earth. Aging can be traumatic; loss can be traumatic. We can't predict when or where trauma hits. You may feel you've lost everything, but you haven't lost control of how you respond to how you *feel*.

Only you can choose to lose control of that.

You can feel calm while everything is lost... if you learn how. That is the key to a happy life—the key to appreciating and inspiring others.

And you *will* inspire others, including us. 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 suffer. The greater our suffering, the more we can inspire others through our compassion for others and ourselves. In fact, the more you suffer, the greater your ability to inspire others, and the greater impact of your kindness...and regardless of what you lose in life...you never lose that.

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.

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