

Working through trauma



DISCLAIMER: I am not a physician, psychiatrist or psychologist; and it is well outside my scope of practice as a coach, to diagnose or treat any kind of trauma or other mental distress. I am, however, trauma-trained within a coaching framework; and I have worked through many layers of my own trauma over the years. This document is a short guide to a few basic approaches you might like to explore. Please seek qualified professional help if you need it.

Trauma

Trauma is defined as “a thing that happens which overwhelms the person's ability to cope”.

It's often referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder - literally the damage from a past event which still lives in the brain, nervous system and body.

Everyone's nervous system is different, so when we go through the same event, your nervous system might sail through relatively unscathed, while mine takes on trauma - or vice versa. There's no way to predict ahead of time; and any kind of comparison is unhelpful (which means if your Uncle Larry mocks or shames you for having trauma around something he once handled with ease ... quit hanging out with Uncle Larry, he's completely wrong and he's not helping!)

Early research into trauma in veterans found that those who were able to gradually put their wartime experiences behind them - by getting together and sharing stories, for example - were able to integrate the events as memories, so they stayed where they belong - in the past.

Veterans who - for whatever reason - couldn't do that, lived with the event as though it were in the present.

The defining quality of trauma, therefore, seems to be that the experience of overwhelm and the incident itself both stay lodged in the body and nervous system, as though that event from the past were still happening in the here and now.

Many of us live with some form of trauma, until we do the work to put it back in the past where it belongs - NOT by dismissing it or suppressing it, but by processing and healing it.

Sometimes that can be done on one's own, and sometimes it needs the help of a qualified professional. I've done both, and I want to reinforce the notion that it is courageous and admirable, to seek help when it's needed.

A word on Complex PTSD

Many of us display the symptoms of trauma, but can't point to a major traumatic event such as abuse, neglect or abandonment in childhood. That can make it feel difficult to heal.

We might be experiencing Complex PTSD.

This is a newly-understood form of trauma, and usually occurs when the individual is subjected to an accumulation of many small traumatic events, repeated over a significant period of time.

It's the trauma equivalent of the 'Death by a Thousand Cuts' or - to use my Mum's Lancashire vernacular - it's like being nibbled to death by ducks.

I learned about this through my own journey with Complex PTSD.

My parents both grew up having lost their same-sex parent (Mum's mother died when Mum was 4yo, Dad's father died when he was 9mo old).

So neither of them had any model of what it meant to BE a mother or a father.

As a result, when I came along (the eldest - aka the guinea pig!), they consulted the experts and read all the parenting books of the day.

Unfortunately, the loudest advice was all about teaching the infant to follow the parents' preferred routine - which meant letting the infant cry herself out and making her wait for the 'official' feed time.

My tiny infant brain interpreted that experience as meaning I was deeply unworthy of being given even the most basic survival attention - and I couldn't trust the world to provide for my needs at all.

My parents did NOT intend for that consequence - in fact, they were doing the best they could with what they had!

But there's no doubt my little brain and nervous system acquired PTSD from the accumulation of small traumatic experiences over the course of many months.

We're only just beginning to appreciate how powerful that can be. But luckily, Complex PTSD can be processed and healed with some attention, over time.

The first step to healing is usually awareness, and an understanding how trauma works, which both open the door to higher levels of compassion and some gentle self-enquiry.

Reading suggestions

The following books are excellent resources for understanding trauma and Complex PTSD, and all offer excellent ideas on how to move forward and find healing:

- *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk
- *What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing* by Dr. Bruce D. Perry and Oprah Winfrey
- *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving: A Guide and Map for Recovering from Childhood Trauma* by Pete Walker

Healing tools

Bilateral Stimulation

It has been found that when the brain's two halves - its right and left hemispheres - are alternately activated, it forces the brain to return to the here-and-now, acting like a 'pattern interrupt'.

This can help the brain and body recognise that a) you are safe right now, and b) the traumatic event is actually not present.

Bilateral stimulation acts as a form of pattern interrupt, forcing the brain's attention to come back into the here and now.

There are a couple of ways you can activate this phenomenon on your own, and one which requires professional assistance (but its track record is excellent).

Butterfly Hug

You can do this on your own with no equipment needed.

- Cross your arms over your chest, with your fingertips resting on your collarbones
- Gently tap both hands while breathing slowly for at least thirty seconds
- Check in with your body and see if you feel calmed
- Repeat as necessary

Hand to hand

You can do this on your own, and all that's required is a smallish object, something you can easily pass from hand to hand - a pen, an iPhone, a ball (not anything you're worried about breaking, or spilling!)

- Hold the object in front of you about chest high, in your right hand
- Move the object out to the right side while your empty left hand moves out to your left side
- Move both hands back to the centre, and pass the object to your left hand
- Repeat the same move with the left hand, moving the object out to the left and returning to centre while your empty right hand moves out to the side and back to centre
- Keep passing the object back and forth, moving it out to the side and then passing it across your body
- Continue at least thirty seconds, and keep repeating if necessary

EMDR

EMDR is a professional trauma healing process. EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, and it's a form of therapy which has been shown to help enormously with trauma healing.

EMDR works by 'scrambling' the brain's circuits so that the traumatic event finally gets integrated and becomes a memory, back in the past where it belongs, rather than being held 'in the present'.

EMDR needs to be done with a qualified therapist and uses specialist equipment.

EFT

Another tool many people find effective is EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique).

This is based on acupuncture / acupressure points, and has been found very helpful in all kinds of areas of life - including trauma healing.

There is a LOT of info out there on the interwebz about EFT - I recommend starting with these three:

Brad Yates' YouTube channel - I love Brad's soothing and simple approach, and his generosity

Medical News Today has a good, solid science-oriented review and how-to guide

Gary Craig provides a deeper dive for those who like to know how a thing works - he was an early pioneer of this technique, and coined the term EFT

Finally

I hope this mini-resource has given you some ideas of where to go next. My suggestion is to become extremely gentle with yourself; then activate radical compassion, and engage the curiosity of the explorer as you work through this material and your own trauma-healing journey.

Living with trauma in the body makes everything just that little bit harder - especially growth and expansion, and also the basics like boundaries and self-priority.

If you think I could be helpful as you move through this work, please don't hesitate to reach out.

I'm not a therapist, **obviously** ... but I do have some experience from my own journey, and I consider myself 'trauma-informed' and can provide compassionate witnessing and support as you do your work. I can also provide a referral if you know you're likely to do better with trauma therapy - a very fine option to consider.

PS I also have access to one additional tool which I didn't make, but which I use frequently - sadly I can only provide in a 1:1 setting due to copyright agreements, but if you'd like to know more please contact me.

Thank you for letting me support you with these ideas about how to walk yourself through the process of recognising and healing your own trauma. If you need more help, visit my website janettedalgliesh.com.
