

**Appendix 3**  
**Suggested Reading for**  
**Chapter 3: The Effects of Trauma**  
**in Women's Lives**

## UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA\*

In this topic you will learn about trauma and the feelings associated with it, and how you have learned to cope with trauma in your life. This is difficult work, and may bring up some strong emotions for you. You may not want to complete the whole chapter all at once. To help ease you into (and out of) this work, we'd like to first introduce you to a simple ritual. Each time you begin and end your work, use this ritual to keep yourself focused in the present and to remind yourself of the positive aspects of your life.

### Beginning and Ending Ritual

Use this simple activity any time you are working on difficult issues. Some women like to complete this activity just prior to talking with a counselor, writing in a journal, visiting with a family member, doing some artwork related to trauma, or repeating an exercise from this book. First, write down four good things that happened to you in the last two days. They don't have to be big things—just things that made an impression on you and that were enjoyable. For instance, my list for the last two days is:

1. I saw a cute baby and she smiled at me.
2. I had a nice visit with an old friend.
3. I finished reading a heartwarming novel.
4. The sweater I put on this morning felt warm and cozy.

At the end of the session, write down two things you are looking forward to. One that is within the next few days and one in the more distant future. For example, my list would be:

1. Coming right up: buying a new kind of bread I really like at the grocery store.
2. In the future: spring-warm weather, flowers, and birds.

The purpose of this ritual is to help you stay connected with the good things in your life while you are doing this work and also to put a frame around your work so it becomes a small part of your life with a beginning and an end, not your whole life.

To begin work on this topic, write four good things that happened to you in the last two days:

---

\* Copied with permission from New Harbinger Publications. Mary Ellen Copeland and Maxine Harris © 2000. Healing the Trauma of Abuse: A Woman's Workbook (pp. 107-114). New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA [www.newharbinger.com](http://www.newharbinger.com).

## **Categorizing Your Traumas**

Everyone experiences minor trauma-things that are temporarily upsetting and that may make us anxious and upset. Such things include:

- not getting an anticipated check on time,
- the car breaking down,
- missing an appointment,
- a friend being rude to you, or
- getting a cold.

Most of the time you probably get over these small traumas quickly. Below, list some minor traumas that you have experienced recently:

---

---

---

---

From time to time everyone experiences trauma that is harder to deal with and more upsetting: seeing a beloved pet hit by a car, losing a friend to a devastating illness, having your house broken into, getting divorced, or being a victim of a robbery. These experiences may cause an increase in anxiety and fears, insomnia, depression, nightmares, and flashbacks. As time goes on, the impact of these traumas tends to decrease until finally, while the person may still think of such traumas from time to time, day-to-day activities are not significantly affected.

List any of these kinds of trauma you have experienced in your life.

---

---

---

---

Unfortunately, people also experience trauma that is so horrific that it may seem almost impossible to overcome—trauma that is so awful that the symptoms persist and often overwhelm the person's life. Examples of these kinds of trauma include child abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, being a victim of a violent crime, losing one or several close family members, or living through a war. Sometimes right after the trauma occurs, and sometimes much later, people who experience these kinds of trauma develop severe and persistent symptoms such as depression, anxiety, rage, nightmares, flashbacks, and feeling out of touch with reality. They may turn to alcohol, illegal drugs, promiscuous sex, or self-harming behaviors to try to ease the pain.

Little notice was taken of the effects of trauma, or the relationship between traumatic experiences and these kinds of symptoms, until after World War II and, more recently, the Vietnam War. In fact, people who experienced severe war trauma were (and still are) often told that they had a mental illness. After World War II, some soldiers and survivors of the Nazi concentration camps displayed serious and persistent symptoms that demanded attention. Similarly, during the Vietnam War, veterans returned from the battlefield with symptoms so serious and so obviously related to their war experiences that the effects of trauma could not be ignored. In recent years, the effects of other kinds of horrific trauma have also been recognized—yet much of the literature about trauma still reflects what we learned from soldiers, especially prisoners of war, and holocaust survivors.

We know that relieving the effects of trauma on a person's life takes very specialized treatment along with lots of persistence and courage. Activities such as the ones in this book can help you regain a sense of your power, validate your experiences, help you regain your sense of self so you can enjoy life, and relearn how to connect with others in meaningful ways.

What kinds of severe trauma have you experienced?

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Factors That Affect Recovery and Healing

Every person responds to trauma in his or her life differently. There is no set period of time for recovery. The factors that seem to affect how long it takes to get over the effects of trauma in one's life—or at least reduce these effects so they are not controlling the person's life—include:

- personality type;
- the environment you grew up in—was it hectic and chaotic, or calm and peaceful;
- your current living circumstances;
- your general health;
- substance abuse or addictions;
- the length of your exposure to the trauma;
- the number of traumas you have experienced—even minor traumas; and
- the severity of the trauma.

No one else can determine how a trauma could or should affect someone else; do not feel that your trauma was “too small” to have had such a powerful impact.

One woman told us that she grew up in a hectic and chaotic household—small traumas were happening all the time, such as burned dinners, people yelling at each other, lots of people moving in and out. Some traumas that were harder to deal with were also happening simultaneously—she lost her favorite pet and she was involved in a serious car accident. These factors all combined to make it harder for her to deal with a serious sexual assault when she was a teen.

What factors in your life do you feel affect your healing journey?

---

---

---

---

## Sharing Feelings and Experiences

List five words that you often use to describe how you feel.

---

---

For many people, talking about the trauma helps—it's part of the healing process. You may be uncomfortable or not used to talking about it, but the inability to talk about feelings and the hard things that happen to us in our lives can make the healing process more difficult. In many families, people don't talk about trauma at all. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, family members may feel it is best to forget the bad things that have happened.

When Charlene was a little girl, her friend was killed in a very bad accident while she was playing with Charlene. Charlene's family felt it was best for her not to talk about the accident and they tried to get her to focus her attention on other things so she would forget. Charlene never forgot. As an adult she spent many years in counseling to relieve the effects of this trauma.

Many schools now offer children special programs and services when there has been a tragedy in the community to give students the opportunity to talk about the trauma and begin to heal.

A second reason for silence in families is that the family members don't want other people to find out about bad things that are happening, especially if it involves abuse. It becomes a family secret—a secret that protects the abuser and allows the abuse to go on. Family members may even be threatened to keep them from telling others what is happening, or there may be an unspoken rule in the family not to talk to anyone about certain things.

How did your family talk about feelings and other experiences?

---

---

---

---

It helps to think about the words associated with these experiences so you can think more clearly about them, write about them, and tell supportive people what happened to you.

In this exercise, you will write some words that could be used to describe feelings related to trauma. To help you think more clearly about the feelings associated with the word, think of a color that matches that feeling you are describing. (You can use the same color over and over if that feels right to you.) For example, "angry-bright red," "isolated-dark gray."

---

---

---

Now make a list of ten "feeling" words that describe the trauma you experienced.

---

---

---

---

How did it feel to write and think about these words?

---

---

---

---

---

---

## **Coping with Trauma**

When you were traumatized, especially if you were traumatized repeatedly, you figured out some ways to cope with the trauma so you could get by and still go to school, do your homework, find some peace and quiet for yourself, play, and so on without feeling the pain so much. This took a lot of strength and creativity.

One woman found some special places in the woods near her home. She called these places "camps" and spent a lot of time there reading books, playing with her

dolls, day-dreaming, and watching the clouds through the treetops. She felt safe and comfortable there because nobody could find her.

Describe some ways that you learned to cope with abuse in your life.

---

---

---

---

Repeat several times, out loud if possible, "I am a strong and creative person. I used these attributes to help me get through the hard times in my life."

### Ending Ritual

Describe something you are looking forward to that will happen soon.

---

---

Describe something you are looking forward to that is happening in the more distant future.

---

---

### Optional Activities

1. Glance at the headlines in your local paper. How do you think the people in these stories might have been affected by what happened to them? Do you think these things will be easy or hard for them to "get over"?
2. Begin talking about trauma. Briefly talk to someone you trust about your trauma—a sentence or two would be fine.

How did that feel?

---

---

## Things to Remember Every Day

- I can talk about feelings related to trauma if I wish. Talking to others about bad things that have happened to me helps me heal.
- I am a strong and creative person—I was able to develop some ways to cope with trauma that helped me at that time. I am proud of my strength and creativity.

## THE BODY REMEMBERS WHAT THE MIND FORGETS\*

### Beginning Ritual:

To begin work on this topic, write four good things that happened to you in the last two days:

---

---

---

---

### Body Memories

Usually, when we are asked about a memory most of us assume that we must search for a story of some sort. We might try to conjure up a visual image of something that happened or a place where we spent time. Thoughts, words, and images do constitute our memories, but not entirely. We also remember things in other ways, such as through sound, smell, and taste. Sometimes the smell will be all we remember—the context is lost but the smell remains.

Our bodies also have memories. A feeling, an ache, an itch—these are physical sensations, but they can also be memories. Just as our intellects remember in words, our bodies' memories are stored in sensations. That pain in your back may be because you got too much exercise, or it may be a memory of something that happened a long time ago. In some cases, there will be other memories that accompany the pain, but in other cases the pain itself will be the only memory you have.

When you were traumatized, your body responded to this severe stress by trying to protect itself. It secreted hormones and other substances that may have given you some of the strength it took to endure what you went through. But with severe and repeated trauma, the body forgets how to shut this release off. You may feel tense, irritable, anxious, and nervous all or most of the time. When this goes on for a long period of time, you develop chronic tension and pain in various parts of your body—sometimes in the part of your body that was most affected by the trauma.

---

\* Copied with permission from New Harbinger Publications. Mary Ellen Copeland and Maxine Harris © 2000. *Healing the Trauma of Abuse: A Woman's Workbook* (pp. 115-122). New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA [www.newharbinger.com](http://www.newharbinger.com).

You may have so much pain that you try to ignore it. You may feel that you are really out of touch with your body and how it feels, or perhaps the discomfort and pain is so persistent that it keeps you from doing the things you want to do. With consistent use of some of the relaxation and stress-reduction exercises in this topic, you will notice that your body starts feeling better and better.

Patsy, a thirty-year-old stockbroker, felt that her body was always very tense and tight. She assumed this was normal. However, when she started getting aches and pains in her neck, shoulders, and lower back, she sought help. She began getting massages from a physical therapist, and noticed that each time she received one, her body felt more loose, flexible, and comfortable. The physical therapist explained to her the connection between the tension in her body and the trauma she experienced as a child. She now uses stress-reduction exercises she learned from the physical therapist to continue to release the tension she has held in her body for so many years.

This topic contains several exercises that, if used regularly, will gradually help you relieve the tension in your body. Most people notice they feel much better each time they do a relaxation and stress-reduction exercise. Occasionally people report that while engaging in a relaxation exercise they suddenly feel overwhelmed by very uncomfortable feelings in their bodies. If this happens to you, open your eyes right away and stare at something that you really like to look at (a book, a plate, a pet, and so on) for several moments until the uncomfortable feelings go away. If this happens to you often, you could keep your collection near or in the place where you do these exercises so you can look at them when these feelings come up, and when you feel better you can either return to the exercise or leave the work until another time. (Don't forget to do your closing ritual before leaving your work for the day!)

Repeat the exercises in this chapter that feel good to you as often as possible—make them an important part of your life.

## **Body Scan**

Read this exercise before you do it and then do it from memory—trying to read it as you are doing it will be too distracting.

Relax comfortably in a chair or lie down—whichever feels better to you. Loosen any tight clothing. Take three deep breaths. Notice how your body feels in the space it is in. Notice how your body feels as it comes in contact with the chair, or the floor or ground. Notice how your clothes feel on your body. Now pretend you have a searchlight. Use that searchlight to search inside your body to find places that feel relaxed. Spend a few moments focusing on each of these places. Next, use the searchlight to find places where your body feels tense or uncomfortable. Spend a few moments focusing on each of these places.

Where in your body did you feel comfortable and relaxed?

---

---

Where did you feel tense?

---

---

---

Why do you think you feel tense and uncomfortable in this part of your body? Do you feel it has to do with something that is going on now, such as stress at work or carrying a heavy object, or do you think it has to do with something that happened in your past?

---

---

---

You may have had this tension or discomfort in your body for many years. It may have affected the way you sit, stand, and walk.

One woman noticed that she had a lot of tension in the upper part of her chest. Sometimes the pain became quite sharp and debilitating and she actually needed to hunch over to relieve it. Medical testing didn't show any problem. She remembered that the pain in her chest began when she was very young, when she felt afraid of the older boy in her neighborhood who frightened and hurt her.

You may not know why these places in your body feel the way they do. Fortunately, it is not necessary to know where the tension came from in order to release it.

Now that you have identified the places in your body that need help, try the exercises that follow. With practice, your body will begin to change the way it responds to the things that happen (and happened) to you.

## **Tension Releasing**

Again, read the exercise before you begin, then put the book aside. This should take about five minutes. Play soft music in the background if you wish.