

The background features a dark, blurred scene of a hand holding a lit sparkler, with bright yellow sparks emanating from the tip. A large, semi-transparent blue circle is centered in the upper half of the image. To the left of the title, there are four white concentric circles of varying diameters, resembling a target or ripple effect.

Understanding Our Emotional Triggers

Lisa Frestone, Ph.D.





W e l c o m e !

Lisa Firestone

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Senior Editor - PsychAlive

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Part 1: What are triggers?

In this Webinar:

- What Are Triggers?
- Where Do Triggers Come From?
- How to Handle Your Triggers and React Differently



Triggers cause someone to have a particular feeling or memory.

In mental health terms, a trigger refers to something that affects your emotional state, often significantly, by causing extreme overwhelm or distress.



Source: [Healthline](#)



A trigger affects your ability to remain present in the moment. It may bring up specific thought patterns or influence your behavior.

Triggers vary widely and could be internal or external. Specific phrases, odors, or sounds can all be triggers for people who have experienced traumatic events.

Source: [Healthline](#)

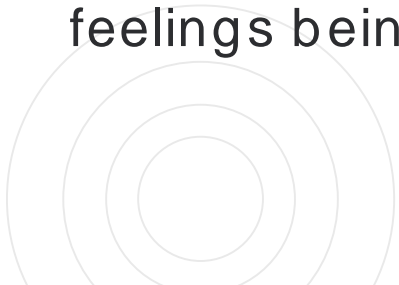


We all have those moments when all of a sudden something directed towards us sends us into an emotional tailspin.

- a single word our partner uses to describe us that makes our blood boil
- an offhand, teasing remark from a friend that ignites a deep feeling of hurt
- a comment from our boss that floods us with self-doubt
- a certain cry from our baby that makes us feel helpless



- Many people have trouble making sense of their reactions, and therefore, feel like a slave to them .
- As soon as they feel thrown into an old, familiar emotional response, their defense systems activate.
- They no longer respond to what's happening but to a whole set of old feelings being stirred up inside them .



Triggers and Relationships

- Nothing triggers us as emotionally as our relationships with other people
- We may feel set off by each other's words, a tone of voice, or facial expressions or read between the lines and infuse all kinds of meaning into our partner's behavior.
- This is why we'll talk a lot about triggers in the context of relationships.



Triggers Set Off Our Critical inner Voice

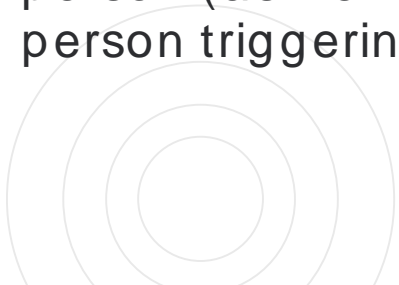
The **critical inner voice** refers to a well-integrated pattern of destructive thoughts toward our selves and others. The “voices” that make up this internalized dialogue are at the root of much of our maladaptive behavior. This internal enemy fosters inwardness, distrust, self-criticism, self-denial, addictions and a retreat from goal-directed activities. The critical inner voice effects every aspect of our lives: our self-esteem and confidence, our personal and intimate relationships, and our performance and accomplishments at school and work.



Triggers Set Off Our Critical inner Voice

- When we feel triggered by our partner, we usually aren't just dealing with what the other person is saying or doing, but whatever we are telling ourselves about what they are saying or doing.
- Not only does our critical inner voice influence our own sense of identity, becoming the cruel and doubting “voice” in our head, but it also warns us about other people and relationships in general.
- When someone says or does something that upsets us or we're faced with a triggering event, our reaction can be exacerbated by our critical inner voice attacks:

- The reason this “voice” is so destructive is not that it notices real things that need to be addressed, but because it distorts the world through a dark filter.
- It exaggerates and adds an interpretation that is often skewed.
- Our behavior can become a response to an internal conversation we’re having with our inner critic rather than to what’s really happening in the moment.
- This heightened response is much more likely to provoke the other person (as well as their own critical inner voice) and begin a cycle of one person triggering the other as nothing gets resolved.



IMPLICIT VERSUS EXPLICIT MEMORY

Implicit
Memory



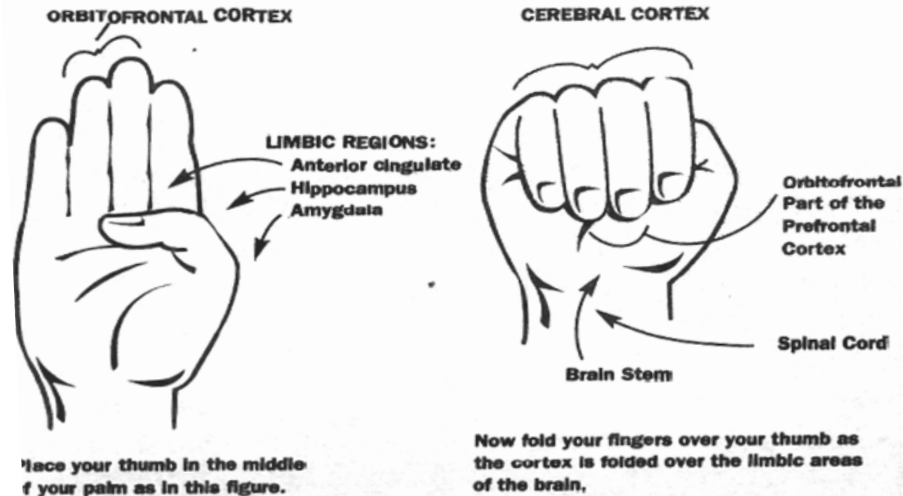
Explicit
Memory



THE BRAIN IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND




Daniel Siegel, M.D. – Interpersonal Neurobiology



9 Important Functions of the Pre-Frontal Cortex

1. Body Regulation
2. Attunement
3. Emotional Balance
4. Response Flexibility
5. Empathy
6. Self-Knowing Awareness (Insight)
7. Fear Modulation
8. Intuition
9. Morality





**Part 2:
Where do
triggers
come from ?**

- Our intense emotional responses are heavily shaped by our past.
- The feelings or words that trigger us have direct connections to the ways we were seen and treated as well as attitudes to which we were exposed.
- Triggering events tap into early, often implicit, memories of painful experiences



3 Topics We'll Look At:

- Attachment History
- Primary Emotion
- Trauma



How Early Attachment Patterns Influence Triggers

To understand why certain behaviors trigger us more than others, it's helpful to explore our attachment history.

We form attachment patterns in early childhood with important figures in our lives. These patterns go on to function as “working models” for relationships in adulthood. They influence how we behave and how we expect others to behave.



Secure Attachment

- As children, if we experienced a **secure attachment** pattern, we were able to feel safe, seen, and soothed by a parent (or primary caretaker) and to see that parent as a secure base from which we could venture out and explore.
- As an adult, we tend to be more satisfied, supportive, and secure in our relationships, feeling connected, while also allowing ourselves and our partner the space to move freely.



Anxious- Ambivalent Attachment and Triggers

- If we experienced an anxious ambivalent attachment as a child, our parent was probably intermittently available, sometimes making us feel safe, seen, and soothed, but other times being unavailable, intrusive, or misattuned to our needs. This created a pattern where we had to turn up the volume on our needs and express them intensely in order to get them met.
- As adults, we will be more prone to form a preoccupied attachment in relationships and to feel insecure and unsure of our partner's love . We may feel desperate, anxious, fearful, or jealous, and act in ways that come off as controlling, clingy, or possessive.

Anxious- Ambivalent Attachment and Triggers

- Having a preoccupied attachment style makes us more likely to feel triggered by a romantic partner in specific ways.
- For instance, if we catch our partner looking at someone else, our critical inner voice may say, “He wants to be with other people. He’s going to leave you. You should confront him right now!” If our partner is quiet at dinner, we may think, “Why isn’t he talking to you? He finds you boring. Make him tell you what’s wrong.”



Avoidant Attachment and Triggers

- If we had a parent who was emotionally unavailable and not attuned to our needs, we most likely formed an avoidant attachment pattern and learned that to be in touch with our needs was painful, frustrating, and shame-inducing.
- As adults, we're likely to form a dismissive attachment in which we are emotionally distant from our own needs and those of our partner.



Avoidant Attachment and Triggers

- Because we have adapted by disconnecting from our own needs, we often perceive others as emotionally “needy.”
- When we feel triggered by our partner, we may see their attempt to connect as needy, dramatic, or overwhelming. Our voice attacks may say: *Why is she so focused on you? You need your space. He is so emotional all the time. You can't deal with this right now. She asks too much of you. You need to create a boundary. He's such a baby.*



Primary Emotions

- We may think our emotions are rational responses to real events, but we often aren't aware that the intensity of our feelings has a lot to do with being triggered by our past.
- Dr. Les Greenberg, a founder of Emotion-focused Therapy describes how primary emotions are our initial emotional reaction.
- Primary emotions can be adaptive reactions to what's really going on, but they can also be maladaptive responses based on schemas from our past. They may be sparked by current events, but they often connect to ways we felt early in our lives.
- Additionally, primary emotions are often covered over by a more defended secondary emotion.
- Much of the time, we are only consciously aware of the secondary emotion. For example, if our partner forgets a plan we had made together, we may jump to feeling anger to avoid feeling the more vulnerable emotion of being hurt.

Primary Emotions

- Our primary emotions offer us clues into our needs, so it is important to get in touch with them.
- They are often linked to deeper feelings of hurt, sadness, or shame from our past.
- Facing them can make us feel vulnerable and exposed. As a result, we may be more inclined to react to our romantic partner based on our secondary emotions: the anger that follows shame, the anxiety that follows sadness, etc.
- Instead of a knee-jerk reaction to a trigger, we can allow ourselves to ride the wave of emotion that teaches us something deeper about ourselves and our reactions.

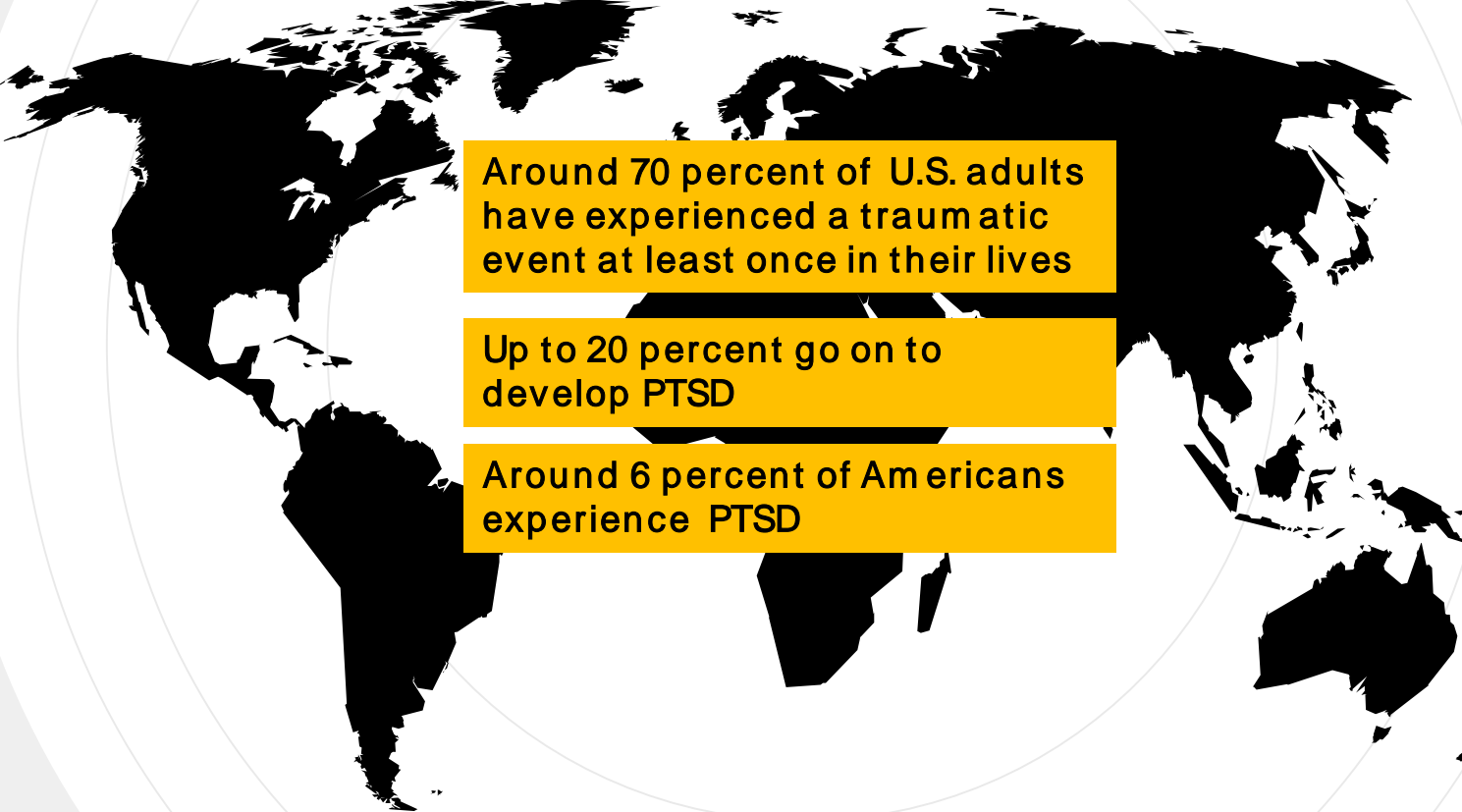




Definition of Trauma

Deeply distressing or disturbing
experience that overwhelms the
mind and central nervous system

Prevalence of Trauma

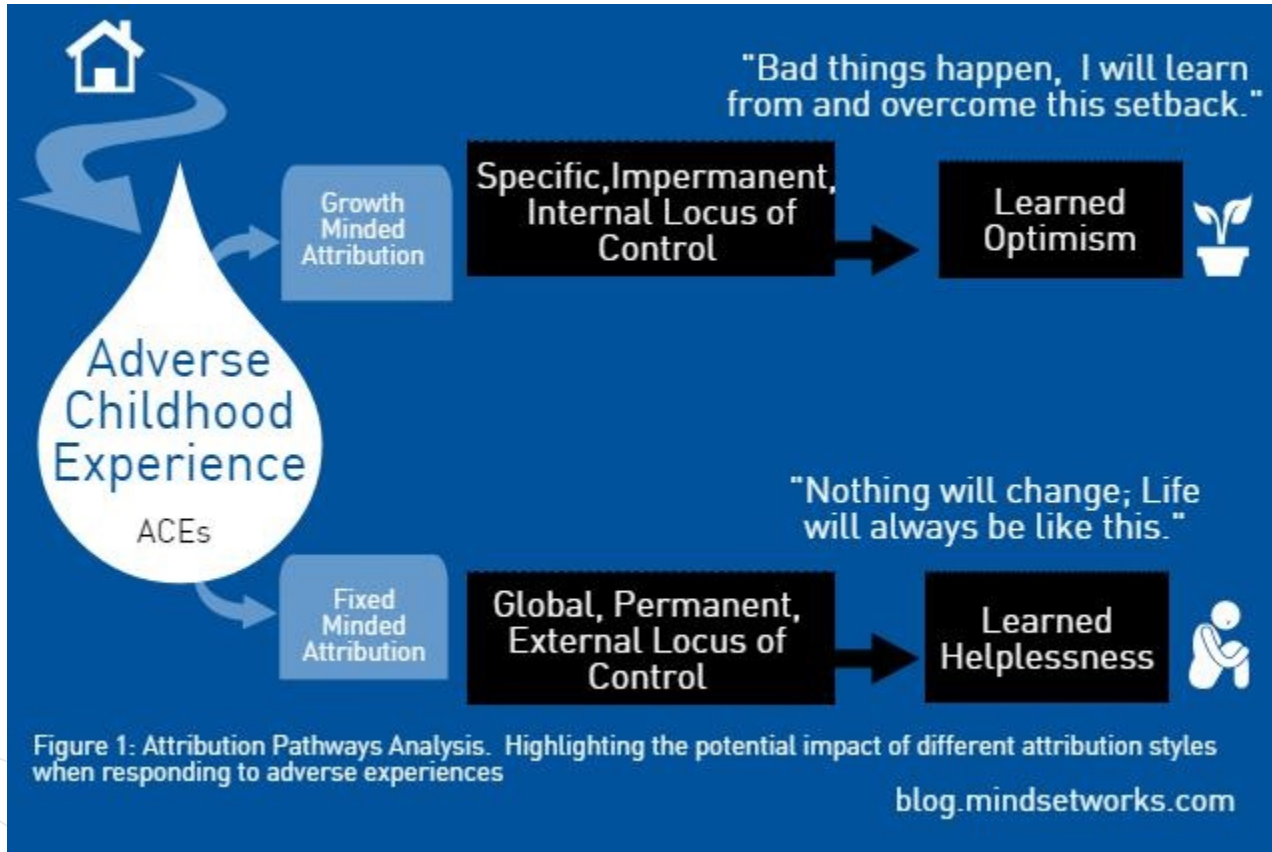


Around 70 percent of U.S. adults have experienced a traumatic event at least once in their lives

Up to 20 percent go on to develop PTSD

Around 6 percent of Americans experience PTSD





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Complex Trauma

- Psychological disorder resulting from prolonged exposure to interpersonal trauma
- “Repetitive, prolonged, or cumulative”





Big T and little t trauma

Big T Trauma

- Serious loss, abuse, or life-threatening event

Little t trauma

- Causes distress, fear, or pain and, therefore, changes the way you see yourself, others, or the world



What does trauma do to us?

Reactions to trauma differ depending on the characteristics of the individual and the meaning of the trauma to the individual.



What does trauma do to us?

Initial Reactions: exhaustion, confusion, sadness, anxiety, agitation, numbness, dissociation, confusion, physical arousal, and blunted affect.

More Severe Responses: continuous distress without periods of relative calm or rest, severe dissociation symptoms, and intense intrusive recollections that continue despite a return to safety.

Delayed Responses: persistent fatigue, sleep disorders, nightmares, fear of recurrence, anxiety focused on flashbacks, depression, and avoidance of emotions, sensations, or activities that are associated with the trauma, even remotely.





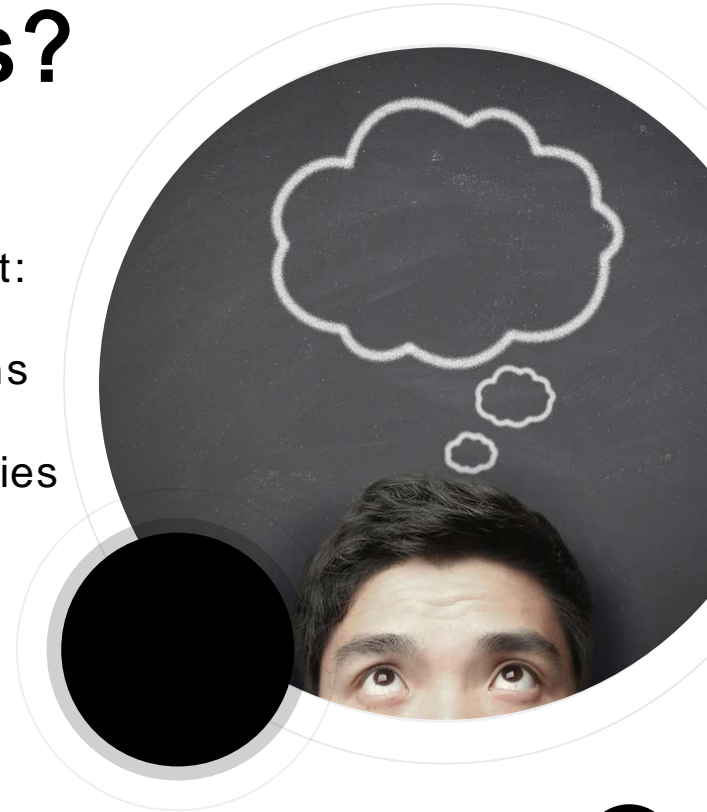
What does trauma do to us?

Foreshortened future: Trauma can affect one's beliefs about the future via loss of hope, limited expectations about life, fear that life will end abruptly or early, or anticipation that normal life events won't occur (e.g., access to education, ability to have a significant and committed relationship, good opportunities for work).



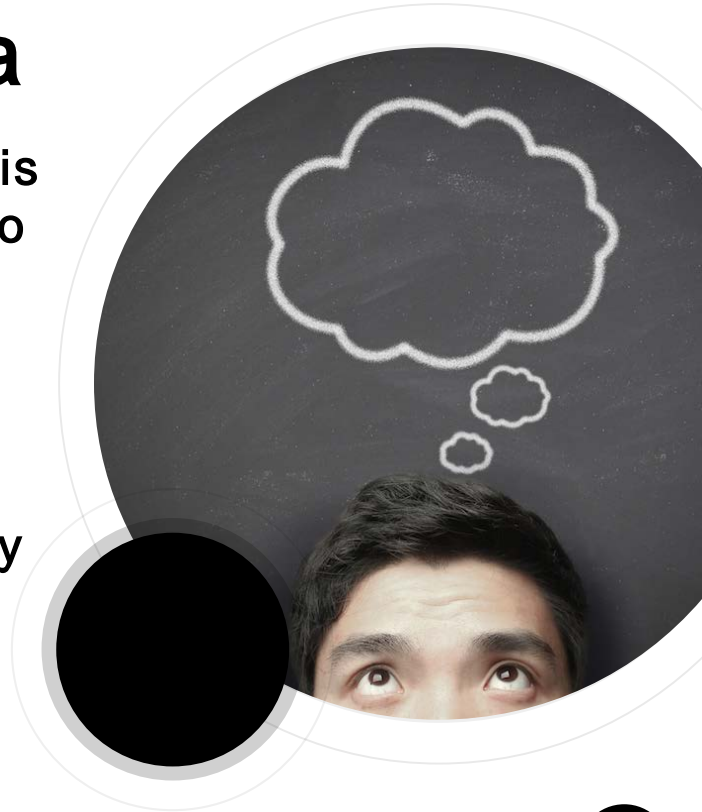
What does trauma do to us?

- **Cognitive Reactions:**
 - Cognitive errors:
 - Excessive or inappropriate guilt:
 - Idealization
 - Trauma-induced hallucinations or delusions
 - Intrusive thoughts and memories
- **Hyperarousal and sleep disturbances**
- **Feeling different**
- **Triggers and flashbacks**



The Importance of Resolving Trauma

- When trauma is unresolved, it is much more likely to cause us to have triggered reactions.
- Unresolved trauma haunts us and intrudes into our current life.
- When we resolve traumas, they no longer have the emotional intensity.





**Part 3:
How To Handle Our
Triggers And React
Differently**

Understand Your Triggers



How elements from our past trigger us in the present



Think about a recent time that you got triggered...

- How did you feel at the time?
- What event or feeling in your childhood do you think led you to feel triggered in the recent situation?
- Write a story that makes sense out of why you felt triggered.



Choose Your Words

Choose from the descriptive list given below and pick the word that best describes the deeper emotion that comes up when you get triggered emotionally. This is often some kind of fear about yourself or how others feel about you. It may be some kind of anguish or hurt.



Lonely

Dismissed and Unimportant

Frustrated and Helpless

On Guard and

Uncomfortable

Scared

Hurt

Hopeless

Helpless

Intimidated

Threatened

Panicked

Rejected

Like I Don't Matter

Ignored

Inadequate

Shut Out and Alone

Confused and Lost

Embarrassed

Ashamed

Blank

Afraid

Shocked

Sad

Forlorn

Disappointed

Isolated

Let Down

Numb

Humiliated

Overwhelmed

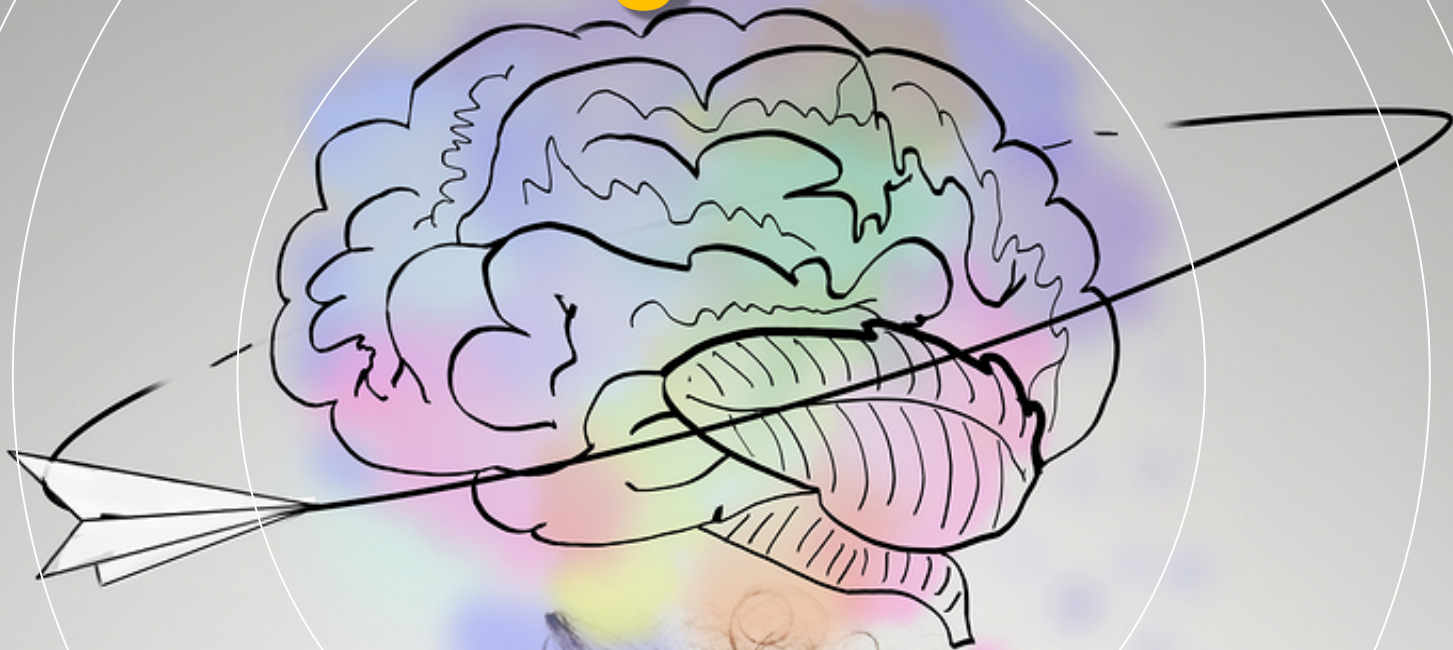
Small or Insignificant

Unwanted

Vulnerable

Worried

Integration



Interpersonal Neurobiology

Curious



Open

Accepting



Loving



Self- Compassion

“Being touched by and not avoiding your suffering”

From Kristin Neff:

Self-compassion is not based on self-evaluation. It is not a way of judging ourselves positively; it is a way of relating to ourselves kindly.

Three Elements:

1. **Self-kindness** Vs. Self-judgment
2. **Mindfulness** Vs. Over-identification with thoughts
3. **Common humanity** Vs. Isolation



Mindfulness

Key Findings:

- Mindfulness-based therapies are effective in reducing PTSD symptomatology.
- May be effective in restoring connectivity between large-scale brain networks in individuals with PTSD
- May mitigate the negative effects of stress and trauma related to adverse childhood exposures, improving short- and long-term outcomes
- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction enhanced psychological functioning and improved inflammatory biomarkers in trauma-exposed women.



SOURCES: Gallegos, A. M., Lytle, M. C., Moynihan, J. A., & Talbot, N. L. (2015). Mindfulness-based stress reduction to enhance psychological functioning and improve inflammatory biomarkers in trauma-exposed women: A pilot study. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 7(6), 525-532. doi:10.1037/tra0000053

Boyd, J. E., Lanius, R. A., & McKinnon, M. C. (2018). Mindfulness-based treatments for posttraumatic stress disorder: A review of the treatment literature and neurobiological evidence. *Journal of Psychiatry & Neuroscience*, 43(1), 7-25. doi:10.1503/jpn.170021

Ortiz, R., & Sibinga, E. (2017). The Role of Mindfulness in Reducing the Adverse Effects of Childhood Stress and Trauma. *Children*, 4(3), 16. doi:10.3390/children4030016



A circular collage-style image showing a person from a high-angle perspective, sitting at a desk and writing on a document. The desk is covered with a blue patterned cloth and contains various items: a laptop, a pink coffee cup on a saucer, a pair of purple glasses, a smartphone, a notebook, and some pens. The person's hands are visible, one holding a pen and writing on the paper. The overall scene suggests a focused work or study environment.

Creating a Coherent Narrative



Why is it important to make sense of your trauma?

- ✓ Research shows that with self-reflection and understanding, we can free ourselves from the effects of our trauma.
- ✓ Making sense of our story by writing a coherent narrative allows us to have a sense of who we've been, who we are now, and who we'd like to become.
- ✓ *“When we create a narrative of who we are, we link past and present so we can become the active author of a possible future, too.”*
~ Dr. Dan Siegel



Forming a Story: The Health Benefits of Narrative

James Pennebaker & Janel Seagal, Journal of Clinical Psychology, 1999

- “Writing about personal experiences in an emotional way for as little as 15 minutes over the course of three days brings about improvements in mental and physical health.”
- “..writing serves the function of organizing complex emotional experiences.”
- “..the formation of a narrative is critical and is an indicator of good mental and physical health.”
- “Forming a story about one’s experiences in life is associated with improved physical and mental health across a variety of populations.”
- Ongoing studies suggest that writing serves the function of organizing complex emotional experiences.



Memories of traumatic events can be themselves traumatic: uncontrollable, intrusive, and frequently somatic. They are experienced by the survivor as inflicted, not chosen – as flashbacks to the events themselves.

In contrast, narrating memories to others (who are strong enough and empathic enough to be able to listen) empowers survivors to gain more control over the traces left by trauma.

Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self.



Tips for Writing a Coherent Narrative

- ▷ Write as an adult.
- ▷ Write rationally.
- ▷ Write autobiographically.
- ▷ Write intuitively.
- ▷ Write with feeling.
- ▷ Write about how the past influences your present.
- ▷ Write with balance.
- ▷ Write with self-compassion.



Identifying Traumas

List some emotional or physical traumas or traumatic events that have happened in your life. These do not have to be “Big T” traumas. A trauma can be any significant, distressing event or incident that shaped you as a child – things that made you feel bad, scared, ashamed, etc.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____


7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____





The background features a vibrant blue gradient. In the upper left, there is a large, semi-transparent black circle. Overlaid on the blue background are several autumn leaves in shades of yellow and gold. On the right side, there are three concentric white circles of varying sizes, creating a target-like effect. The text is centered in the lower half of the image.

Coping Strategies

to help with feelings that
arise when triggered



Toolkit

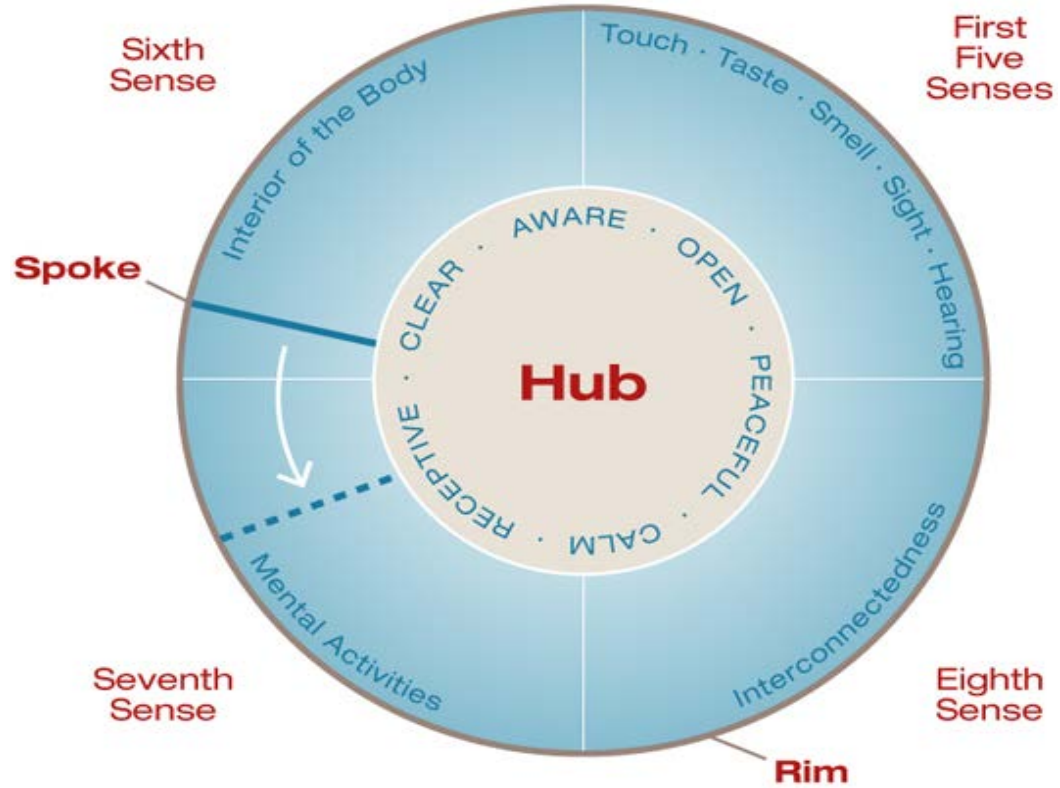
- Name It to Tame It
 - Wheel of Awareness
 - RAIN Approach
 - Balancing the Mind
 - 4- 7- 8 Breathing
- 
- 

Name It to Tame It

Helps strengthen the left hemisphere of our brain's language capabilities and link them to the more raw and spontaneous emotions on the right side of our brain (integration)



Wheel of Awareness





The RAIN Approach

Recognize

Accept/ Acknowledge/ Allow

Investigate

Non- Identification





Balancing the Mind

Can help you achieve more calm and balance during times of chaos or stress.


Step 1: Place one hand on your chest over your heart and one hand on your abdomen.

Step 2: Apply a gentle amount of pressure with each hand and see how you feel.

Step 3: Try switching the position of your hands, so that the hand on your chest moves to your belly and vice versa.

Step 4: Again, place a gentle amount of pressure with both hands and notice how this feels.

Step 5: Place your hands in whichever position feels best and simply breathe in and out slowly until your body starts to relax, and your mind becomes calmer



4- 7- 8 Breathing

Been shown to help relieve stress, lower blood pressure, and induce sleep.

Step 1: Put the tip of your tongue to the top of your mouth just behind your two front teeth.

Step 2: Breathe in through your nose for four seconds.

Step 3: Hold your breath for a count of seven seconds.

Step 4: Breathe out through your mouth for eight seconds.

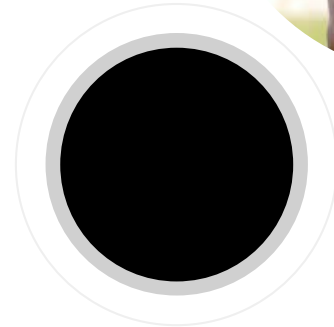
Step 5: Repeat at least five times.



The Road to Resilience

APA

- Make connections
- Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems
- Accept change is a part of living
- Move toward your goals
- Take decisive actions
- Look for opportunities for self-discovery
- Nurture a positive view of yourself
- Keep things in perspective
- Maintain a hopeful outlook
- Take care of yourself



Pathways to Resilience

Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D.

- The perceived availability of social relationships
- The degree of perceived personal control
- The degree to which they can experience positive emotions and self-regulate negative emotions
- The ability to be cognitively flexible
- The ability to engage in activities that are consistent with one's values and life priorities that reflect a stake in the future

Source: Meichenbaum, D. (n.d.). *IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT RESILIENCE: A CONSIDERATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ABOUT RESILIENCE and IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT* [PDF]. Miami, FL: Melissa Institute.



Post-traumatic Growth

Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D.

“PTG is the ability to experience positive personal changes that result from the struggle to deal with trauma and its consequences. PTG highlights that strengths can emerge through suffering and struggles with adversities. Individuals may develop a renewed appreciation of life and a commitment to live life to the fullest, valuing each day; improved relationships with loved ones; a search for new possibilities and enhanced personal strengths and new spiritual changes.”

Source: Meichenbaum, D. (n.d.). *IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT RESILIENCE: A CONSIDERATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ABOUT RESILIENCE and IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT* [PDF]. Miami, FL: Melissa Institute.



Post-traumatic Growth

Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D.

- Experience positive emotions, regulate strong negative emotions
- Adopt a task-oriented coping style
- Be cognitively flexible
- Undertake a meaning-making mission
- Keep fit and safe
- Change your thinking (Challenge your critical inner voice)

Source: Meichenbaum, D. (n.d.). *IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT RESILIENCE: A CONSIDERATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ABOUT RESILIENCE and IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT* [PDF]. Miami, FL: Melissa Institute.



A photograph of a desk with a spiral notebook, a pen, and a small potted plant. The image is overlaid with a large, semi-transparent grey circle on the left side and a smaller, semi-transparent white circle on the right side. The text "Psychological Treatment for Trauma" is written in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font across the center of the image.

Psychological Treatment for Trauma

Treatment

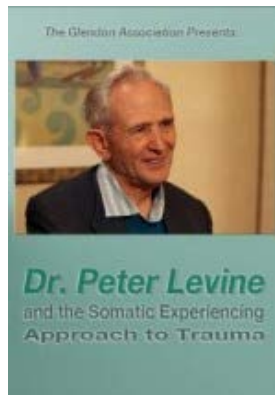
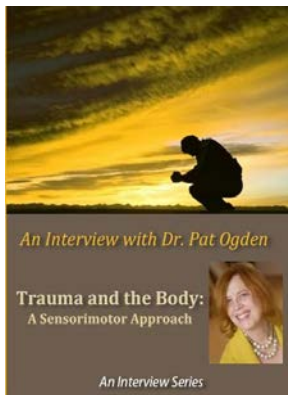
Meta-analysis demonstrates efficacy of:

- Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE)
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
 - for post-traumatic nightmares
- Cognitive Processing Therapy
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)



Body-focused Therapies

- **Pat Ogden**
 - Sensorimotor Psychotherapy
- **Peter Levine**
 - Somatic Experiencing
- **Bessel van der Kolk**
 - Wide variety of methods to deal with complex trauma



The title is surrounded by several yellow outline stars of varying sizes. One is at the top left, one is to the left of the title, and two are to the right of the title.

Compassion- focused Therapy

Reduce shame and self-criticism by developing a compassionate understanding of themselves in relation to their trauma.

Thanks!



Any questions?

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