
Healing from the Tornado

— Adult Resilience and Recovery —

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Phases of Disaster Relief

(adapted from Patricia Watson, PhD)

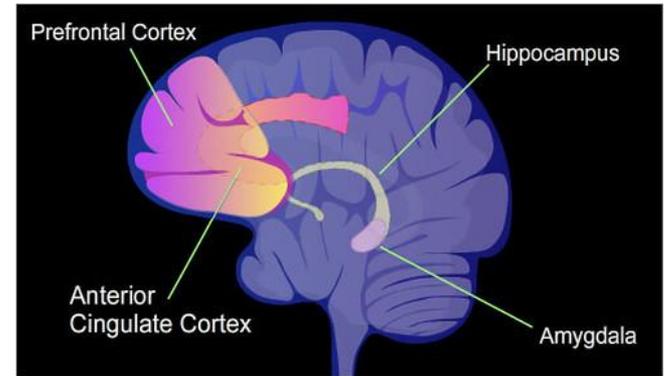
- ❖ Initial Impact Phase - shock, fear, anxiety
- ❖ Heroic Phase - trying to prevent losses
- ❖ Honeymoon Phase - Collective outpouring of community support
- ❖ Disillusionment phase (“second disaster”) - Resentment, tension, frustrations with the systems/organizations, feeling alone again
- ❖ Reconstruction Phase (long-term)

What is Trauma?

- ❖ Trauma is powerful response to a very distressing event. Most often these events are sudden, sometimes unexpected, and include danger, a disruption in one's sense of safety, and a high risk or perceived risk of injury or death.
 - accidents, illness, natural disasters, crime, war, abuse, indirect exposure, loss, eviction
- ❖ What happens in our brain response to trauma?
 - Our brain is always responding to our environment and is wired for self preservation.
 - Fight - Flight - Freeze
 - Window of Tolerance
- ❖ Let's learn more!

Neuroscience of Trauma Response

- ❖ A traumatic event engages all these parts of the brain intensely and immediately.
 - Amygdala: The brain's "alarm" system and emotional center.
 - Hippocampus: The brain's storage for the most recent conscious memories.
 - Thalamus: Translates sights, sounds, smells, into the language of the brain.
 - Prefrontal Cortex: The brain's decision making center.



Neuroscience of Trauma Response

❖ Flight - Fight- Freeze FIGHT/FLIGHT/FREEZE

How does your nervous system figure out how to respond during a traumatic event?

- It's a split-second, unconscious process designed to choose the best option for self preservation.
 - Can I escape? FLIGHT
 - Can I overtake the threat? FIGHT
 - Can I make the threat lose interest or move on? FREEZE
 - COLLAPSE - If none of these work, disconnection between brain and body may occur.



Neuroscience of Trauma Response

❖ Window of Tolerance [WINDOW OF TOLERANCE](#)

The Window of Tolerance (developed by Dr. Dan Siegel, MD) describes the optimal ZONE in which one can function in everyday life.

When you are in your Window of Tolerance you feel calm and able to handle anything that might be happening.

- Hyperarousal = angry, agitated, annoyed, overwhelmed, upset
- Hypoarousal = zoned out, bored, fatigued, disconnected, don't care

Effects of Trauma

- ❖ Locus of Control
 - One of the most common feelings after a traumatic event is that life is unpredictable and that you may not have control over bad things that happen
 - Secondary levels of trauma - They can change the sense of trust or views of yourself, others or the world
- ❖ Cumulative factor of living in the pandemic
- ❖ Contributing factors to long-term struggles
 - Stress Model - We all have a threshold of how much stress we can handle. Our ability to cope significantly decreases when we rise above that line.
 - Cumulation of triggers
 - Previous traumas/major life changes
 - Rebuilding efforts - These can be both healing and triggering due to the long-term exposure

Common Reactions

- ❖ Re-experiencing
 - Nightmares, Recurring images/sensations, Flashbacks
 - Distress when something reminds you of it
- ❖ Avoidance of things that remind you of it
 - People, Conversations
 - Your own thoughts and feelings
- ❖ Anxiety
 - Trouble sleeping, eating
 - Irritability
 - Trouble concentrating
- ❖ Depression/Fatigue
- ❖ Increase use of alcohol and/or drugs
- ❖ The Unanswerable Question: **Why?**

The Many Sides to Anxiety

- ❖ Anxiety can be a helpful signal
- ❖ Indicate where we need to plan or prepare
- ❖ How can we tell when it is no longer adaptive?
 - Interference with functioning
 - Results in trauma response
 - Leads to obsessive or compulsive behaviors
- ❖ Role of Social Media
 - Is it helping or hurting you?
 - When to set boundaries
- ❖ Unpredictable Triggers
 - Weather
 - Other tornadoes/News (e.g. KY and surrounding states)



The Comparison Trap

“The worst trauma is your own.” - David Kessler

- ❖ The temptation to compare stories and how that affects validation of our experiences
- ❖ Survivor’s guilt
- ❖ Why was my experience harder or easier than another’s?
- ❖ How can you work on validating yourself without judgment?



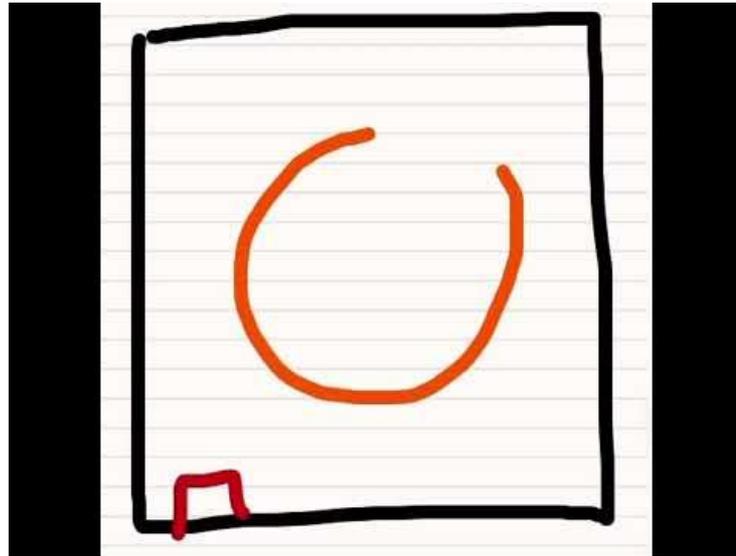
Balancing Your Beliefs/Emotions

The idea is NOT to discount your fears (and other emotions) or your experiences but to find BALANCE in them.

- ❖ What do you know to be true?
 - Then vs. Overall vs. Now
- ❖ Both things can be true!
 - You went through a horrible tragedy AND you are safe now
 - This is a difficult road AND there is hope that you can get through it
 - You are grateful that your family survived AND you are angry your house or your property did not
- ❖ Awareness of where we put our energy - Accept that we cannot control everything and focus on the things we can
- ❖ Grief is complicated and non-linear

Grief is Like a Ball in a Box

- ❖ Here is a visual analogy of the impact of grief over time.
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5zGRT1sf_Y



Your New Relationship with Weather

- ❖ Trauma is a sensory experience. When we are triggered by a sight, sound, or other sensation that we encountered during a trauma, our body will feel the way it did at that time (e.g. anxiety)
- ❖ Goal: These sensations become less intense and less frequent over time
- ❖ Use the adaptive side of anxiety to plan for these times
 - Self-Monitoring - SUDS
 - Develop a Personal Tool Kit
 - Reach out for support
 - Self-care after - hitting your reset button
 - Accept, don't judge - when we try to fight what we perceive to be a negative feeling, it often becomes worse or induces more shame than when we accept it

Self-Monitoring SUDS (Subjectives Units of Distress Scale)

❖ Subjective Units of Distress Scale

HOW DISTRESSED AM I?

Subjective Units of Distress Scale:
A Self-Assessment Tool



- ❖ Tolerable Level of Arousal
 - The level of distress and discomfort you can experience while remaining mindful and present - that is, able to function adequately
 - > 70 can become problematic - interfering with functioning and slip into habitual ways of coping, which generally are not helpful or healthy.
 - Spend some time identifying in detail what thoughts, feelings, and body sensations are specific to your experience
 - Before, during, and after a triggering event identify where you fall on your scale.

Creating a Personal Tool Kit for Coping & Self Care

- ❖ What to put in your personal tool kit?
 - 4 core strategies for reducing overall stress and long term impact.
 - Attention: mindfulness, visualization, breathing, meditation
 - Creativity: art, music, singing, play, gardening, cooking, working on a project
 - Reflection & Exploration: journaling, talking to others, therapy, SUDS
 - Health: exercise, social relationships, daily activity, nutrition, medication
- ❖ What do I need when I am acutely experiencing a trauma response?
 - Grounding Activities
 - Breath Training
 - Mindfulness
 - Affirmations
 - Support Network
- ❖ Let's learn what these techniques mean and how we might use them!

Grounding Activities

- ❖ Grounding is a set of simple strategies that can help you detach from emotional pain or anxiety and worry.
- ❖ It provides a temporary way to gain control over your feelings and prevent them from escalating.
- ❖ 4 core strategies (Mental, Physical, Soothing)
 - Mental:
 - 5 senses, “categories” game, “describe” game, counting/alphabet tasks
 - Physical:
 - Touch, stretching, eating, breath training, “spaghetti” tense and release, exercise
 - Soothing:
 - Affirmations, gratitude, prayer, looking ahead, picturing people you love

Breathing

- ❖ Anxiety causes an increase in our breathing rate as part of the fight, flight, freeze response to a perceived threat.
- ❖ When our breathing rate increases without physical exertion we expel too much CO₂. The imbalance in O₂ & CO₂ in our system causes symptoms.
 - dizziness, tingling in the extremities, weakness, headache, and muscle stiffness.
- ❖ Breath Training
 - Sit or lay comfortably without restricting your belly or chest
 - Take a breath in for 4 seconds.
 - Hold for 2 seconds
 - Exhale slowly and completely for 6 seconds.

Affirmations

- ❖ Thinking positively can change our perspective and mood and move negative emotions and stress out of our way.
 - How to use affirmations:
 - Create personal affirmations that feel meaningful to you.
 - Use positive and clear language, using “I” statements.
 - Say them repeatedly out loud as a daily routine or whenever they are needed.
 - Write them on post-it notes where you will see them in your living space.
 - The more you practice the more you will begin to believe the affirmations to be true.
 - I am confident and create opportunities wherever I go.
 - Everyday is a fresh start with a new beginning.
 - Everything I do, will lead me to where I need to be.
 - I am in charge of how I feel, and I choose to be positive today.
 - I am grateful for all the I have in my life.

Mindfulness

- ❖ Trying to control or avoid worry by focusing on negative thoughts or trying to repeatedly suppress worries can sometimes *strengthen* the negative experience.
- ❖ Mindfulness is one way of skillfully disengaging or letting go of negative thinking.
- ❖ Mindfulness Training
 - Sit comfortably and ask yourself *What am I experiencing right now?*
 - thoughts, feelings, body sensations
 - Allow yourself to just acknowledge what is happening.
 - Focus on breathing. Bring your attention to the body sensations of breathing.
 - Try to let all thoughts pass through your mind - noticing them without attachment
 - Expand your awareness to your whole body breathing - be aware of all body sensations
 - Imagine tension leaving, thoughts passing through and breathe being present.

Resources

- The grief cycle after a disaster. [The Phases of Disaster: Reflections from President Jennings](#) (Episcopal Church)
- book resource [Healing Your Grief When Disaster Strikes](#)
- Free online support groups Local to Philadelphia [LiveWell Foundation](#)

- SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline
[DDH Brochure \(English\) 2021](#)
[Coping Tips for Traumatic Events and Disasters](#)

- [4 Core Strategies for Managing Stress](#)
- [Trauma and the Brain](#)
- book resource [Mindfulness for Beginners](#)
- Mental Health America [Coping With Disaster](#)
- American Psychiatric Association <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/coping-after-disaster-trauma>