

## **Don't let the past own you.**

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When you accept triggered feelings as true threats, the past owns you in the present.

You keep believing that you should be ashamed, that the trauma was your fault, or that something bad really is just about to happen. This results in a vicious cycle of more shame, more fear, and more pain. It sends a message saying, "Watch out, it really is hopeless," and your body responds by going into fight, flight, freeze, or submit mode.

**Don't let the past stay in charge.** Keep reminding yourself, "I'm triggered—I'm just triggered."

## **Triggering is your body's way of being overprotective.**

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When someone has been traumatized in their family, home, neighborhood, or community, any or all of those settings will become triggering, even if they are now completely safe.

**Triggering is no one's fault.** You don't have control over triggers—all you can do is choose how to respond to them.

The next time you're triggered by something in your environment, remind yourself that triggering doesn't mean that you've chosen badly. It's that trauma in your past has left a field of landmines in your present. Your brain and body are focused on preventing more trauma by being even more vigilant and on guard.

## **Recovery is all about balance.**

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Overcoming childhood trauma and neglect requires learning to balance rest and activity; distance and closeness; thinking and feeling; and exposure and avoidance.

For instance, avoiding too many triggers will constrict your normal healthy life, while exposing yourself to unnecessary triggers will overactivate your trauma responses.

One rule of thumb is to accept triggers when they accompany something you really want (like a relationship or a job that's important to you) and to avoid triggers when something is less important.

## **You are “here” now, not “there.”**

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Triggering confuses where you are in time and place. The timing mechanisms in your brain get thrown off. During a feeling flashback, the past doesn't feel like the past, and the traumatic experience does not feel over and done with.

Although your feelings are a good guide to what you experienced in the past, you need to use your thinking skills to know if you are safe or in danger in the present.

Add up the facts: Are you at risk for being attacked right now? Are you truly alone and without any support? Or does it just feel that way?

## **There is no wrong way, no wrong decision.**

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Trauma survivors are often left with a paralyzing fear of making the wrong decision.

Trauma turns every decision you make—even simple ones—into a scary, life-threatening experience. Do you answer the question or stay silent? Look up or look down? Smile or keep a straight face? Go to the right or the left?

Keep reminding yourself that, in a life after trauma, there are no wrong decisions. You can only make the best decision with what you know in the moment.

You should also remember that the decisions you make today are generally not life or death—though it can feel as if they are.

## **Don't ask, "What happened?" Ask, "How did I survive?"**

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Because trauma causes deep feelings of inadequacy, survivors develop habits of self-judgment that make it hard to believe they did anything right.

However, they are rarely aware of the *strengths* they developed to survive.

Start to ask yourself, "How did I survive?"

For example, you may have developed the ability to think clearly and quickly in a crisis, to be outwardly calm while in inner turmoil, to work hard, and to persevere. You may have also developed a lasting intolerance for unfairness, a sensitivity to the feelings of others, a protectiveness toward the vulnerable, and a determination to be different from your family.

## **Practice noticing and naming your feelings.**

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Traumatized children quickly learn to disconnect from their feelings for safety. Later, as adults, those feelings still feel frightening, humiliating, or dangerous.

When you're triggered, the feelings come up despite your efforts to push them away, which makes them even more frightening and overwhelming.

**Try to notice and name your feelings rather than getting swept away by them.**

Notice the tension and heat in your body when you feel anger, and call it "tension." Notice your heart racing when you feel anxious, and name it "just your heartbeat."

Noticing and naming your feelings can make them less scary.

## **Change your relationship with pain.**

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Emotional pain can often be overwhelming and intense. When you put the feeling (or what caused it) into words, it brings the hope of relief but also intensifies the pain because describing the source of the hurt often reevokes painful emotions.

To get some relief, learn to notice emotional pain as a physical reaction. First, notice where you feel the pain in your body. What's the quality of the pain? Is it hot, burning, achy, or sharp?

Then “play” with the feeling—breathe into it, relax around it, welcome it, and see if there is any change in it, even a little.



## **Learn to have boundaries.**

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Victims of trauma experience the loss of their right to boundaries.

They learn that boundaries are only for those who have power. Even though a life without boundaries can be very triggering, it is hard to maintain boundaries when you believe you are not entitled to them.

Start with a simple baby step: Become more aware of times when you feel the need for a boundary. Your body will let you know! When you feel uncomfortable with someone's social distance, tone, or behavior, that discomfort is your body's way of telling you that you want clearer boundaries.

## Hold your ground.

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A big challenge in setting boundaries is learning how to *maintain* them.

Often, we unconsciously expect people to respect a boundary we've set, but we forget that they didn't request the boundary or that they may not like or know how to respect it.

Practice verbalizing boundaries as a bottom line, not a request: "I'm not comfortable with \_\_\_\_\_" or "If you want me to do \_\_\_\_\_, I need \_\_\_\_\_."

**Be prepared to repeat the boundary over and over:** "As I've said before, I'm not comfortable with \_\_\_\_\_."

## Remember to begin at the beginning.

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Most of us set our sights on the finish line long before we've left the starting gate. That sets us up for failure. We can't feel successful with the progress we're making if we're only looking at the finish line.

It's good to be aware of the end goal, but for best results, keep your eyes just on this step you are taking now.

Then, when you've taken that step, look ahead only to the next smallest step you can take after this one. **Think of the recovery process as a marathon:** The first mile is your only goal until you get to the second mile.

## Take baby steps!

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To overcome challenges to recovery, it's important to take small steps, building one step upon the other to create a strong foundation.

Trying to take a bigger leap, whether successful or not, doesn't build a sturdy building.

If you are not sure what the next baby step should be, ask yourself: What is one tiny thing you can do differently right now? Let go of a negative thought? Remember to breathe? Notice one positive thing around you? Feel your spine? Take only that one baby step.