C-PTSD WORKBOOK

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This workbook is going to help you understand yourself and the people around you on a much deeper level. Whether you've had feelings of not being "good enough" or a pattern of relationships where you feel lost or betrayed,

you're not alone.

Please know there is no step-by-step or easy checklist that heals complex trauma. There are also no quick fixes. This workbook will act as a guide on your own healing journey.

This workbook is not to be used to diagnose or treat any specific condition. Please seek therapy or support if needed. (See resources on page 50.)

Now, give yourself a big pat on the back for having the courage and desire to grow and expand.

Let's begin...

Note:

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May it be of collective benefit.

What Is C-PTSD?

C-PTSD or (Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is a natural response to childhood experiences that involved: chronic anxiety, neglect, or danger within our closest relationships.

Most people have heard of PTSD, which usually involves experiencing a single incident of trauma (for example: going to war, experiencing assault, or witnessing a violent crime).

C-PTSD Differs in That:

- **The experiences of hurt and overwhelm were inescapable and ongoing.**
- **The experiences of hurt and overwhelm took place in a relationship with a key attachment figure you trusted.**
- **No secure (safe) adult helped you process these experiences.**

This creates a feeling and internalized belief that you are not good enough, broken in some way, and unsafe within the world.

How C-PTSD Impacts Our Sense of Self:

1. You constantly feel overwhelmed.

As children, we learn how to understand and regulate our emotions from adults who model this for us. If we didn't learn this, we can feel consistently out of control. We might spiral when we make small mistakes or wonder why everyone around us seems to have healthy relationships when we do not.

2. You dissociate often.

When you're a child experiencing constant stress or overwhelm, you naturally disconnect to cope. It's too painful to be in the present moment. In childhood, this might look like daydreaming, spending a lot of time alone, having an imaginary friend, or fantasizing about living with another family. This pattern continues in adulthood where we struggle with procrastination, being present in relationships, and using escapism to cope.

3. You have "mood swings".

Mood swings are actually a symptom of chronic dysregulation. When our nervous system is constantly in a state of fight or flight, our moods can change drastically throughout the day. Because we cannot regulate our own emotions, we tend to look to other people to regulate them for us. This puts us on an emotional roller coaster, where how we feel is based on how other people feel.

4. You have little or no childhood memories.

Of course these memories still exist in the body, but when you think about your childhood, you can't recall much. Constant stress floods our brain with cortisol impacting the part of our brain responsible for memory. Often, people with C-PTSD will say, "I can't remember anything major that happened," but day-to-day life was filled with chaos, inconsistency, or parent figures who were disconnected and shut down.

5. You struggle with authority.

You struggle listening to or following rules or structure. In the past, authority figures in your life might have been controlling, manipulative, or shaming. This creates a pattern of rebellious behavior that often impacts our ability to be consistent or to take direction.

6. You feel like you don't belong anywhere.

Our core need as children is to feel that we belong. We need to know we are valued for who we are, not what we can do for other people. If we didn't get this, we have an overwhelming sense that we don't belong or that the world is unsafe, and we cannot find our place in it.

7. You have issues concentrating or following through.

Long ago, you started dissociating and going into a freeze state when overwhelmed. This coping mechanism makes it difficult to concentrate, which leads to a lot of procrastination. A lot of people with C-PTSD describe themselves as feeling physically "stuck," unable to follow through with what they've planned.

8. You wear a mask.

Because you've never fully been able to form a sense of Self, you mask your true thoughts and emotions. You almost feel as though you're performing and can't really be your true Self. This can lead to feeling anxious in social situations and over-thinking everything you say or do.

How C-PTSD Impacts Our Relationships:

1. You have abandonment and/or trust issues.

Rather than feeling safe or nourished in relationships, you often feel unsafe and skeptical. You might question if your friends actually want to spend time with you or if your partner really loves you. You might crave intimacy, and at the same time fear it or push it away. We often end up sabotaging our relationships because at our core, we don't feel worthy of a loving relationship. (We'll learn more about this soon.)

2. You are a people pleaser.

Because we feel like a burden, we people please as an attempt to keep our connections. We believe that asking for our own needs to be met or asserting ourselves will only lead to rejection. This belief creates situations where we betray ourselves or accept behaviors that are unhealthy or dysfunctional.

3. You feel awkward or uncomfortable expressing yourself.

Talking about your emotions, asking for help, or being vulnerable is overwhelming or even terrifying. This comes from consistently being shamed, rejected, or isolated from love in childhood. Eventually, we learned to shut down and to stop expecting a safe relationship with anyone. Opening up feels dangerous because we've never been met with loving acceptance.

4. You tend to be highly controlling or "Type A".

Control is an attempt at safety. Our controlling nature can come out in many ways, such as: criticizing how people do tasks, not letting people help us when we need it, shutting down or giving people the silent treatment, blaming others for our behavior, keeping score in relationships, guilting people around you, and snooping or spying.

5. You lie or leave out important information.

Many of us were punished for telling the truth. We learned to lie or avoid sharing everything so that we could stay safe. Lying can actually become habitual, when we lie about meaningless or “little” things and don’t actually know why. Most of us feel safer if we keep our partner in the dark, which can deeply impact trust within our relationships. Ultimately, lying is a shame-based behavior that we learned as children.

6. You have anger issues.

Anger is typically a “go-to” emotional state for anyone with C-PTSD. But underneath, anger is usually sadness and grief. We might not even know it, but we’re grieving the loss of our childhoods, our sense of safety, and our ability to feel good about who we are. These anger issues can come out the most in our close relationships or in our relationship with ourselves. For example, our mom might make a small comment and a flash of rage goes through our body. Or, we might make a simple mistake and feel strong anger towards ourselves. That anger can bubble up and cause outbursts and reactivity that we later regret and shame ourselves for.

7. You take most things personally.

We often believe that everything happening around us means something about who we are, instead of understanding that people’s behaviors are (mostly) a reflection of how they feel about themselves. Even small incidents can send us into a shame spiral where we question our worth.

8. You over-give.

Many of us have been caretakers our entire lives without having our needs met. This creates situations where we give to people even when they don't reciprocate or take advatnage of us in some way. You’ll know you’re over-giving in relationships if you feel resentful.

Understanding Your Past

To heal from trauma, we have to understand our past. Some of us have such painful pasts that even thinking about it can be overwhelming. As you fill out these answers, take breaks as needed. If uncomfortable emotions come up, try to take deep breaths and remember that understanding what happened to us allows us to resolve it.

Describe the (overall) relationship you had with your mother:

Describe the (overall) relationship you had with your father:

Besides parent figures, who else was involved in taking care of you and what did those relationships look like?

What was the relationship like between your parents? Was there rage, betrayal, or any violence that you witnessed?

When you were upset, how did your parent figures respond to you?

Were you able to depend on your parent figures for affection, understanding, and encouragement?

Did you live with a parent figure who coped in destructive ways? (E.g., using substances, gambling, or stepping outside the marriage)

Did you feel as though you belonged and had parent figures who cared about what you were feeling and going through, or did you end up supporting them or cheering them up?

Were you directly (or indirectly) told to keep secrets or hide the behavior of one parent figure from another? (E.g., hiding a parent's shopping habits or affair)

Family Stories

Family stories are stories that are passed down from generation to generation. They may include hardships family members experienced or addictive coping habits, as well as moments of resilience or strength. Reflect on the experiences of your ancestors, including the different ways members coped and things they have overcome.

Family stories help us understand the overall patterns of family members and shape the beliefs we have about ourselves and the world. By understanding our family stories, we better understand generational trauma as well as the resilience we carry.

Now that you've done some deep reflective work, take some time to look over your answers. These experienced have shaped your thought patterns, beliefs, behaviors, and relationships. Now that you can see them clearly you're going to start this work by writing a letter to your inner child...

Write a Letter to Your Inner Child

Use this page to write a letter to your inner child. You'll want to include how you know what happened, how you understand people weren't always there, and how you'll now be there for the younger version of yourself.

Dear little _____,

Your Future Self

Your future Self is the version of you that's coming from all of the work you're putting in. Every choice, decision, and action helps you become your future Self.
And each day you get a new chance to integrate your past and build a new future.

Use this page to write about your future Self.

Who do you want to be?
What emotional state will you embody?
Who will be in your life?
How will you spend your time?



Re-read this page any time you feel lost, overwhelmed, or unsure.
Your future Self depends on you, and this will keep you on track.

You are not broken. You've adapted to your environment.

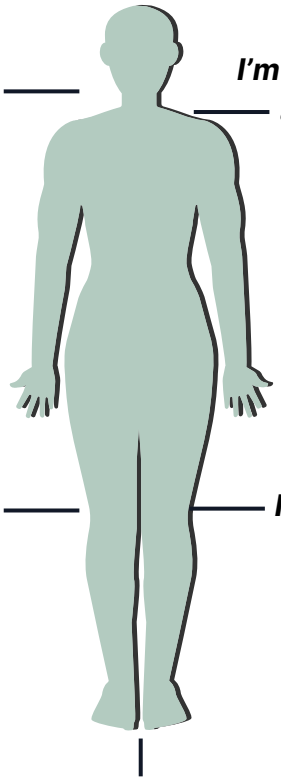
Beginning at birth, our survival fully depends on our attachment figures (or close caregivers). In order for us to develop a secure sense of Self, we need secure attachment figures. Secure attachment figures "see" us through eye contact, showing responsiveness to our emotions, and by consistently soothing us so we can learn how to self regulate.

When our attachment figures have an insecure sense of self, they struggle to "see" us and meet our emotional needs. They tend to be highly reactive (becoming explosive, unpredictable) or easily shut down (becoming detached or giving the silent treatment). Complex trauma develops when our developing mind and body stays in fight-or-flight, and we become hypervigilant or dissociated as a way to protect ourselves. (We'll go more into hypervigilance and dissociation later.)

Secure Sense of Self

(Healthy Environment)

Parent Figure



I have healthy coping skills.

I'm consistently attuned to others.

I can regulate my emotions.

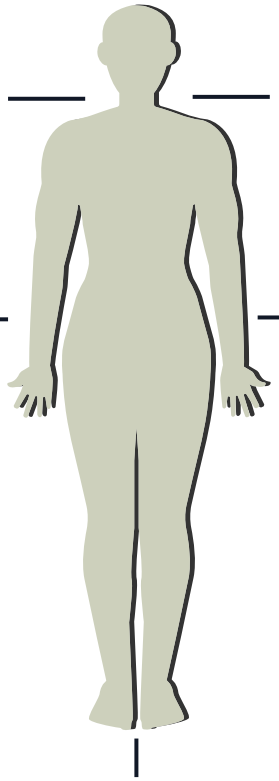
I can meet my core needs.

My behavior is predictable and consistent.

Insecure Sense of Self

(Complex Trauma)

Parent Figure



I'm highly reactive.

I'm unable to attune to others.

I have dysfunctional coping skills.

I 'm unable able to meet my emotional needs.

My behavior is inconsistent. (I have people walking on eggshells.)

Gemma's Story

Gemma was raised in a home with a father who could not regulate his emotions. He could easily "fly off the handle," even over little things. Because he had chronic nervous system dysregulation, he was moody and irritable to be around. At a young age, Gemma remembers staying up at night feeling intense anxiety that something bad might happen. This reflected her unsafe and unstable environment from the unpredictable nature of her father's temper.



Gemma's mother adapted by fawning or people-pleasing. She did all she could do to avoid triggering one of her husband's outbursts. She kept the house spotless and consistently told her children to "not upset your father." When he yelled at Gemma, she would dissociate, teaching Gemma that her father was unpredictable and her mother was unable to comfort her.

Gemma adapted by becoming an intense perfectionist. She internalized the belief that she was a "burden" to explain why her father treated her so poorly. To compensate, she tried all she could to accomplish and "prove" her worth. Though she does well her in career, she silently struggles with intense anxiety and shames herself for minor mistakes.

In relationships, she's often attracted to men who are like her father. She feels most comfortable in a role where she's managing men's anger and trying to keep them happy. Like her mother, she's learned love means betraying herself and her own needs.

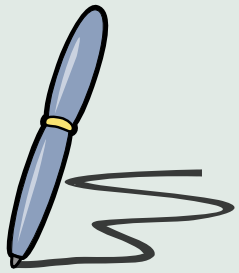
Gemma's Story

After reading Gemma's story, take a few minutes to journal about your own childhood.

Did you have similar experiences?

Can you identify with Gemma?

Let the words flow *without judgement*.



Note: Many people with C-PTSD have very little or no childhood memories.
If no memories are coming up, just write about what you feel in your body when reading Gemma's story.

Ella's Story

Ella's father was a workaholic, and her mother was a stay-at-home mom. Ella's mother was raised by a deeply disconnected mother, and she also struggled to connect with Ella. She gave little affection and felt uncomfortable and frustrated at Ella's sensitive nature.

When Ella would upset her, she would give her the silent treatment: sometimes ignoring her for a few hours, sometimes for days. Then one day out of nowhere, she would speak to Ella again as if nothing happened.

Ella adapted by having an intense desire to please. Her fear of being ignored by the person she loved and needed the most drove her to fawn and defer to what other people needed or wanted.



In her marriage, she feels lonely and isolated, but at least she is not being completely ignored. So she stays.

Asserting herself or asking for her needs to be met might upset her husband, and this would be a risk to her internal sense of safety. She grows more and more resentful over time, but she is too afraid to advocate for herself.

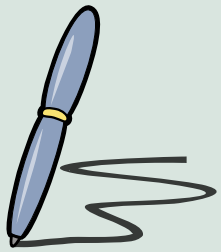
Ella's Story

After reading Ella's story, take a few minutes to journal about your own childhood.

Did you have similar experiences?

Can you identify with Ella?

Let the words flow *without judgement*.



Note: Many people with C-PTSD have very little or no childhood memories.
If no memories are coming up, just write about what you feel in your body when reading Ella's story.

Your Adaptations

Now that you have some examples of how other people have adapted to their earliest environments, let's explore yours.

What did you have to do in order to stay safe (and connected) to adults as a child? Example: "I had to be easy and cause no problems," "I had to stay quiet," "I had to fight or become highly reactive to be heard."

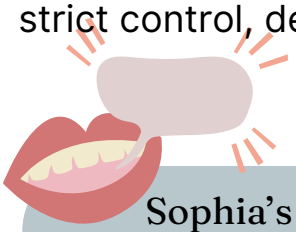
How do you carry these adaptations into your adult friendships and intimate relationships? Example: "I people please," "I get very reactive in conflict," "I shut down and struggle to explain how I feel."

How are these adaptations causing pain or suffering (or having the opposite effect of what you desire)? Example: "I push people away," "I'm afraid or unable to be vulnerable," "When people cry or talk about their feelings I get flooded or feel overwhelmed."

Cultural Adaptations

Let's continue to explore the different influences of your earliest relationships. While complex trauma happens in childhood with our close attachment figures, it's important to understand that how people parent is greatly influenced by their own upbringing, as well as cultural norms.

Dysfunctional cultural norms can condition us to believe we're wrong or broken just for being who we are. This is especially true for people from marginalized communities, those who struggle with financial insecurity, and those raised in shame-based or high control cultures (any group that uses strict control, demands obedience, and expects extreme loyalty to members).



Here are some examples:

Sophia's parents immigrated from Mexico when we she was just 5 years old. She feels so different from her peers and has to help her parents navigate the culture and language as she gets older. She adapts by dressing and speaking like her peers and refuses to bring anyone to her home because of the internalized fear she has of being "different."

Devon grew up in a strict religious home. She's told from a young age that her worth comes from her "pureness." As her body changes, she feels shame and fear, and she adapts by developing a dysfunctional relationship with food so that she is the one to have some control or agency over her body.

Brian likes wearing dresses and doesn't enjoy sports. His father is worried he's gay and will be made fun of in school. He starts to poke fun at Brian's interests and tells him to "man up." Brian adapts by suppressing his love of fashion and trying to be more like the other boys at school.

Asia's parents struggled financially. Exhausted and stressed, they would often snap at Asia and tell her she needed to achieve academically in order to get a scholarship so she didn't struggle like her parents. Asia adapted by becoming a perfectionist and overachiever, feeling as though she needed to save her family from a young age.

Cultural Adaptations

Now that you've read more about ***cultural adaptations***, take a minute reflect on the different ways you may have adapted to your own cultural influences.

Hidden Trauma

Many people feel the impact of C-PTSD, but can't understand why they feel the way they do. After all, they didn't experience physical or sexual abuse. Their parents were present in the home, and they can't remember any catastrophic event.

Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN) is actually quite common. Many parents aren't even aware that they're neglecting their children's emotional needs because their own needs weren't met in childhood. Without the skills to attune to and connect with their children, these parents are often unaware that they're even lacking these skills and do not intentionally hurt their children.

Below are some signs you might have experienced CEN:

Childhood Emotional Neglect Checklist

__X__ I was typically brushed off or ignored when I went to a parent figure feeling upset.

__X__ I was regularly called "dramatic" or "sensitive" when I expressed my emotions.

__X__ I was left alone and without comfort or explanation whenever stressful events or conflict occurred.

__X__ I spent a lot of my childhood comforting my parent(s) or giving them encouragement, but I cannot remember them doing the same for me.

__X__ I was regularly pushed beyond my limits to perform or achieve.

__X__ I often did things or acted out (negatively or positively) to get attention.

__X__ I have few (or no) memories of my parent figure(s) being warm or affectionate, or expressing love towards me.

__X__ I hid a lot of how I felt and dealt with my feelings alone.

__X__ I was often described as "easy" or told that "no one worried about me," and a lot of focus went to others around me (often a sibling).

__X__ I was rarely asked questions or had any interest taken to get to know my individuality.

The Adult Impact of Childhood Emotional Neglect

If you checked 3 or more signs of CEN, it's likely you:

- Feel empty or disconnected
- Are highly anxious
- Feel depressed
- Have trust issues
- Constantly fear abandonment
- Struggle with perfectionism
- Chronically blame or shame yourself
- Feel everyone is mad or upset with you
- Can't ask for help

Connection is our natural state. Adults who've experienced CEN can have many different symptoms from the lack of secure connection in childhood.

One of the most common and pervasive symptoms is a fragmented sense of Self. On the next page, we'll explore how we become fragmented and what that looks like in our daily life.

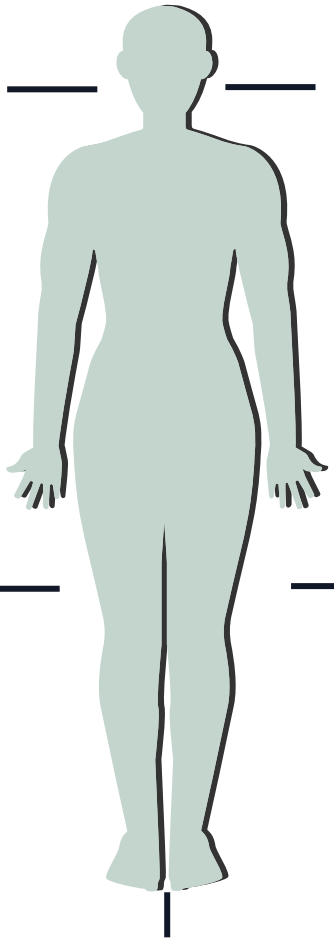
The Fragmented Self

As children, we can't make sense of a parent figure that neglects, harms, or mistreats us. We will do anything we can to keep this foundational connection, regardless of how we're treated or how safe we feel.

To stay connected, we suppress parts of ourselves that we feel won't make us lovable, and express parts of ourselves that we believe will get us love, affection, and approval. This creates internal conflict, and the end result is shame, anxiety, and hypervigilance.

Here's the core symptoms of a fragmented adult:

Fragmented Adult



I'm hypervigilant.

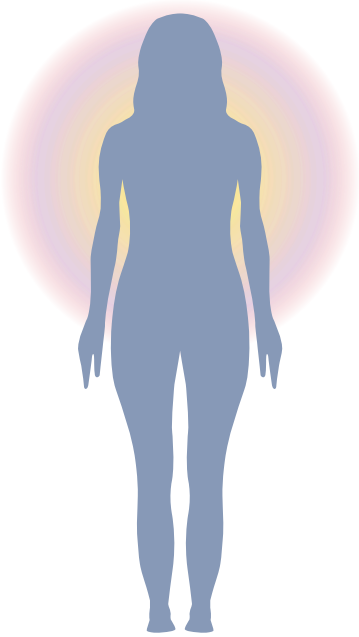
I only feel comfortable in relationships where I am care giving or people-pleasing.

I'm uncomfortabe in social situations.

I have toxic shame (feeling "unworthy").

I''m "zoned out" most of the time (disassociated).

The Real You



The western mental health system diagnoses and pathologizes symptoms. So when we're physically or emotionally unwell, the message is:

Something is wrong with you!

The "real" you is not your current conditioned thoughts, responses, and impulses. The real you isn't broken or unworthy. You've just come to believe this based on lived experiences.

In many shamanic and non-western cultures, there is an understanding that traumatic experiences impact our spiritual selves. Our work isn't to "fix" ourselves; it's to bring ourselves back to wholeness through integrating all the parts of ourselves. The empowering re-frame is:

Something happened to you, and you can heal.

Holistic psychology understands we are mind, body, and soul. The greek root of the word psychology is "psyche," which actually means *soul*. We'll explore our spiritual connection a bit deeper later in this workbook. First, we'll keep exploring why many of us are spiritually disconnected.

Emotional Flooding

Our amygdala is like our alarm system in our brain. When we have complex trauma, we have many “false alarms” when we go into a reactive state. We can become flooded with intense thoughts and overwhelming emotions, often resulting in moments of high reactivity.

Things that can create emotional flooding:

- ***A passive comment from a co-worker***
- ***Your partner being quiet or silent***
- ***Someone not responding to a phone call or text message***
- ***Feedback that is (or seems) critical***

What might happen when you’re emotionally flooded:

- ***You can’t speak without crying***
- ***You dissociate (or leave your body)***
- ***You yell, slam things, or say things you regret***
- ***Your thoughts spiral, and you can’t concentrate on any tasks for the rest of the day***

Grounding

Grounding is a somatic practice that helps you return to your body and center yourself after stressful experiences or thoughts. Use this grounding practice to self regulate as needed. While breathing more slowly and more deeply begin to:



Acknowledge 5 things that you can see around you



Acknowledge 4 things that you can touch around you



Acknowledge 3 things that you can hear around you



Acknowledge 2 things that you can smell around you



Acknowledge 1 thing that you can taste around you

The Importance of Sleep

Sleep is incredibly important in our journey of healing trauma. It's during sleep that our body repairs and rebuilds. But sleep also plays a massive role in our ability to regulate our emotions. Next, we're going build a sleep routine. You'll notice how much better you can deal with your emotions when you commit to these practices.

Step 1: Create a Bedtime

Your bedtime should allow you to get 7-9 hours of sleep (whenever possible). A bedtime is when you go into your bed (even if you're not tired) to sleep. It may take a few weeks for your body to adjust to your new sleep schedule.

My bedtime will be _____ p.m.

Step 2: Set an Alarm

Set an alarm to wake up at the same time every day. At the start, you might feel tired, or even exhausted, but it's important to get out of bed anyway. This will help you fall asleep quicker at bedtime.

My wake time will be _____ a.m.

Step 3: "Sleep Proof" Your Room

You want your room to be as dark and cool as possible during this transition of building a sleep routine. Our skin receptors view light as a sign to wake up, so a sleep shade for your eyes or blackout curtains are very helpful here. Remove all electronics. White or brown noise (easily found on Spotify or YouTube) can be helpful here, too. Keep the temperature of the room as cool as you can; research shows the ideal sleep temperature is 65-72 degrees.

Sleep Checklist:

_____ My room is dark or I have sleep shades.

_____ I have removed all electronics.

_____ I use white or brown noise (if needed).

_____ The temperature is cool (between 65-72 degrees).

_____ I put myself into bed at night even if I'm not tired.

_____ I wake up with my alarm even if I'm tired.

Toxic Shame

Now that you've started to focus on sleep to help you better emotionally regulate, lets's address toxic shame. Toxic shame comes from unsafe, disconnected, or unpredictable childhood attachments.

The end result of toxic shame is feelings of helplessness. We feel "stuck" within our familiar patterns of thinking and behaving with no hope (hope comes from having agency) of changing. Toxic shame stories sound like: "I'm such an idiot," "What's wrong with me?," or "My life is such an emotional wreck." This repeated narrative only keeps our mind and body even more stuck in our habitual patterns.

Let's uncover our toxic shame....

How often and when do you feel shameful, embarrassed, or hopeless and depressed (like your life is not in your hands)?

When you feel this way, what do you typically do? (Example: soothe myself with food, scroll on social media, shame myself, compare myself to other people)

How do you feel about yourself after you go through this toxic shame cycle? (Example: even worse, like I'm worthless, even more out of control, angry at myself, angry at those around me)

Take a minute to read the above. This is all part of your toxic shame story. Each of us carries these stories subconsciously, and they have major impacts on how we view ourselves and those around us. Once we're aware of our toxic shame story, we become empowered to change our narrative.

The Shame Spiral

An event triggers shame in body (E.g., a pit in stomach, tension in jaw/shoulders, hunched shoulders, or discomfort in own skin)

Feelings
of embarrassment, humiliation, or unworthiness (like a “fraud” or “failure”)

Thoughts or worries that others are judging you

Seeking evidence to confirm shameful thoughts or beliefs

Body response:
shut down(freeze)
avoidance (flee)
attack (fight)

End result:
chronic anxiety, depression, addictive habits, playing small, self doubt

Breaking Through Toxic Shame

Agency is at the core of healing complex trauma.
Agency gives us control and autonomy over our own lives—something most of us didn't have in childhood.

List some things you'll do the next time you notice the beginning of your shame cycle. (Example: I will go for a walk around the block, put down my phone, journal, call someone close to me for support, etc.)

_____

_____

_____

Note: The more we practice agency, the more confident we become. The work here is to continue to use positive coping skills until they come naturally to us or a part of our daily lives.

I WILL ALSO SPEAK A NEW STORY TO MYSELF.



Instead of "I'm an idiot,"
I WILL SAY
"I'm learning something new, and I'm proud of myself."

Instead of "I never get anything done,"
I WILL SAY
"I got out of bed and did the dishes, and that's good enough."

Instead of "I should be doing better,"
I WILL SAY
"I'm doing the best I can."

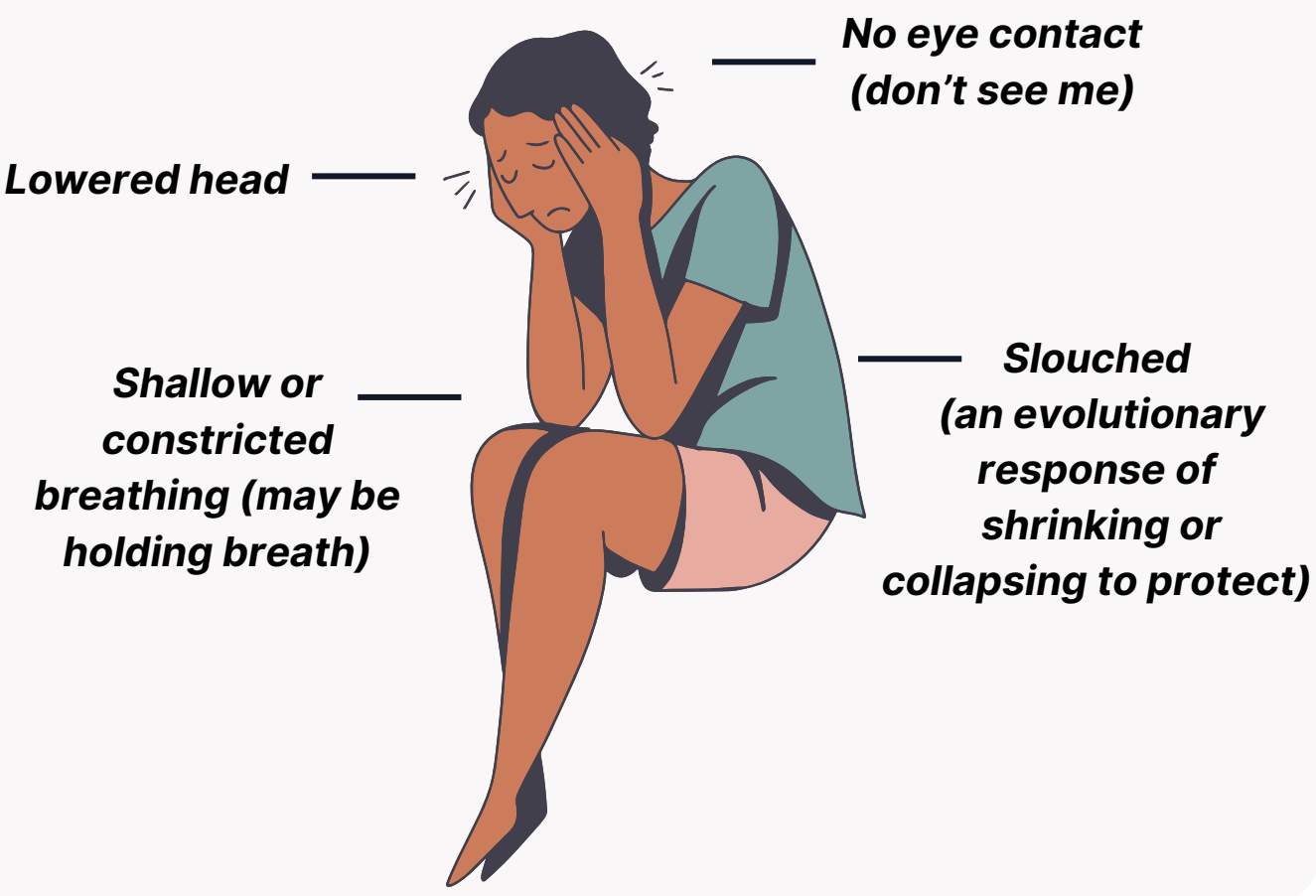
Instead of "My life is a mess,"
I WILL SAY
"I'm creating a life that makes sense for me."

Toxic Shame in Our Body

Complex trauma is stored in our body, in our cells, and our nervous system responses. You now know how toxic shame impacts your thoughts, so let's learn how it impacts your body.

Shame is connected to the processes that occur in our limbic system (the emotional center of our brain). When we experience a shameful experience, our body reacts by sending signals to our nervous system that we are in danger. Our nervous system then goes into: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. (We'll cover these later.)

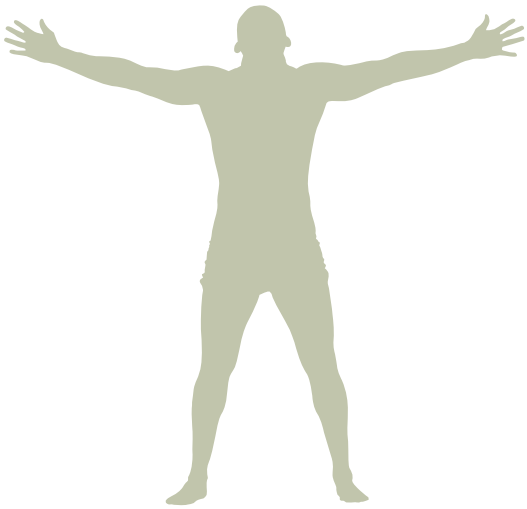
Shame makes us uncomfortable with being seen. Our body goes into a collapsed state where our posture is hunched, our head is down, and we avoid eye contact with those around us.



Shame Release Exercise

This practice teaches us how to use our body to bring ourselves back to a parasympathetic state, feeling safe enough to both connect with and release the shame we're carrying so we can begin to feel more embodied.

Practice this once a day for at least 30 days. It will only take about 3-5 minutes, and can quickly shift your emotional state.



Step 1:
Stand tall with your hands and legs spread about 2 feet apart. Stretch your arms as long as you can while you stretch your spine as straight as you can.

Step 2:
Take 3 deep breaths from your belly making your exhale longer than your inhale. Focus on how your body feels as it takes up space.

Step 3:
Lift your chin up towards the sky and move your eyes from right to left and back (horizontal eye movement signals safety).

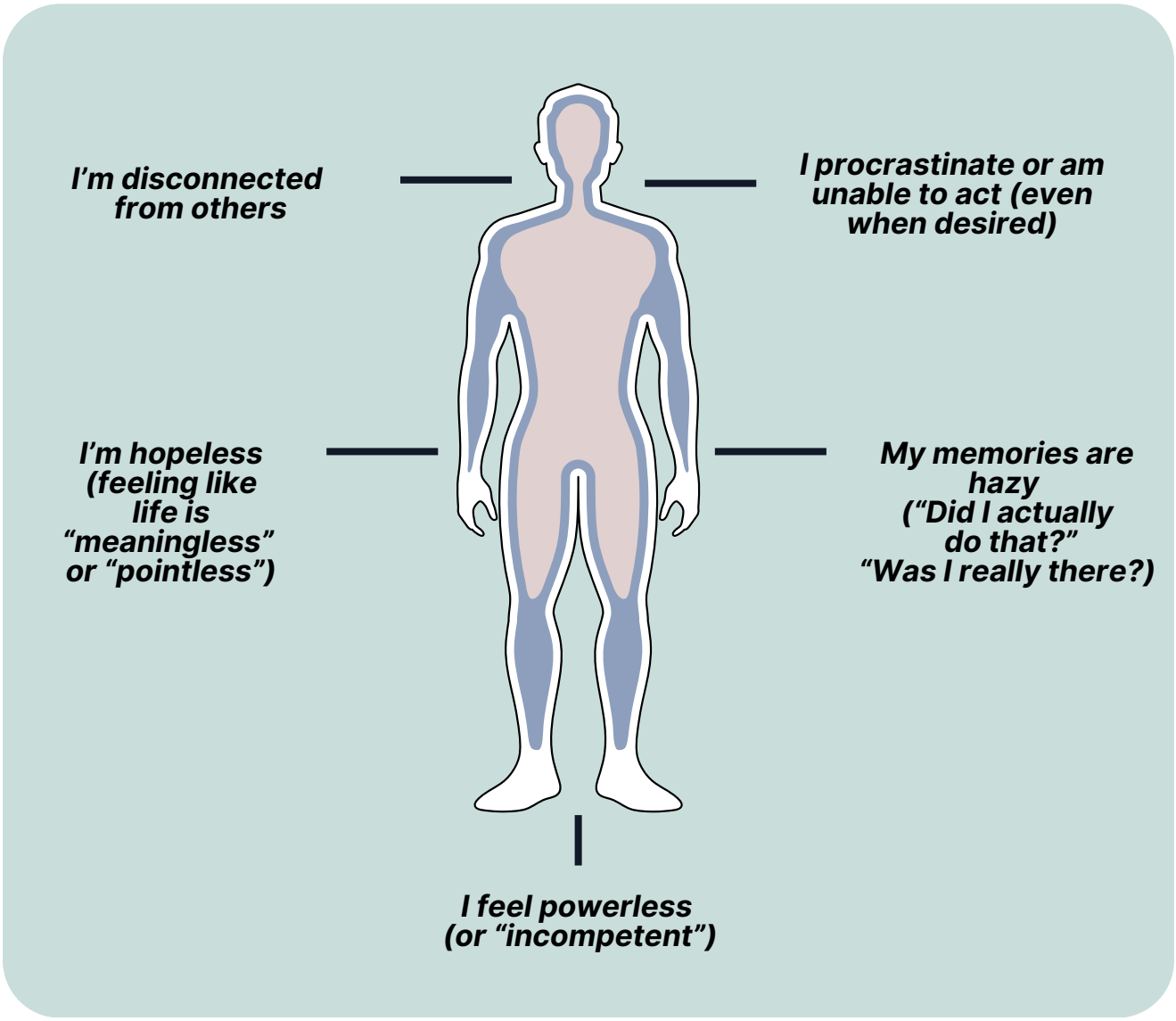
Step 4:
Say (out loud or to yourself)
"I AM SAFE AND I TRUST I CAN HANDLE WHATEVER COMES MY WAY."

Step 5:
Take a minute to just notice how different you feel, and come back to this practice any time you feel yourself having thoughts of not being "good enough" or feelings of unworthiness.

Functional Freeze

Our autonomic nervous system helps us respond to stress and danger. When we're faced with something overwhelming, our parasympathetic nervous system takes over, and we go into a protective state called *freeze*. In freeze, we might scroll on social media for hours, binge on Netflix, or self-isolate even when we want connection.

When we're stuck in freeze, we often struggle to be productive, feel zoned out (dissociated), and have very low energy. Many people with C-PTSD feel like they're "lazy," when the reality is our body is in an immobilized, protected state.



Unfreeze Yourself

Many of us end up shaming ourselves when we're really stuck in a freeze state. We feel like we "should" be able to do it all, putting our nervous system into a deeper state of collapse.

To unfreeze our body, we need to be compassionate, aware, and understanding of our nervous system as we commit to the small practices listed below that can help our body feel safe enough to come out of this protective state. One way to get out of freeze is...

Box Breathing

Box breathing is a technique used by Navy Seals that can help our body enter a parasympathetic, or calm and grounded, state.

How to practice

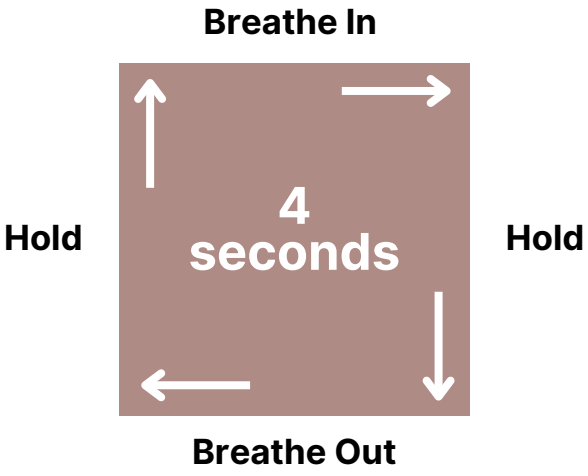
Sitting up or laying down, put your hand on your belly

Inhale or breath in for 4 seconds

Hold that breath for 4 seconds

Exhale or breath out for 4 seconds

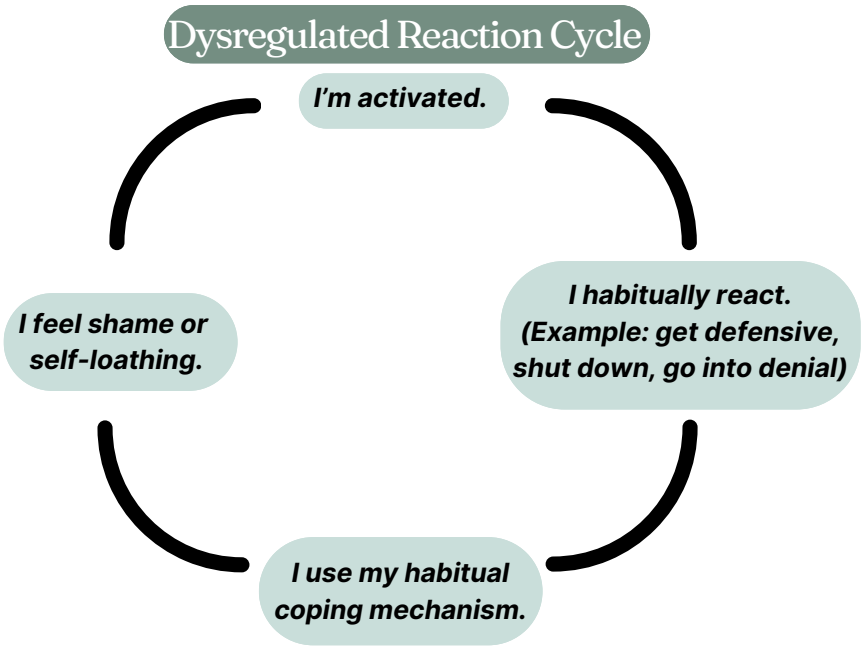
Hold that breath for 4 seconds



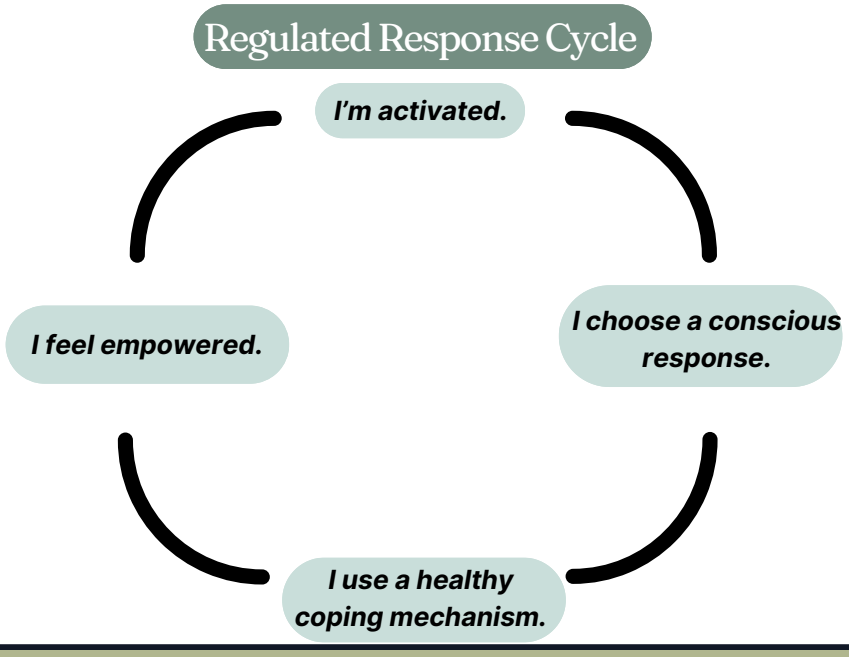
Notice any shifts in sensations as you begin to feel calmer and more energized.
Repeat this at least 3 times while noticing the sensations in your body.
Use this practice anytime you notice yourself becoming stuck in freeze.

Understanding Your Triggers

To heal from C-PTSD, we have to understand what emotionally activates us. Triggers are when past emotional wounds are activated in the present moment. Every human being has triggers based on our past lived experiences, so what activates us will be unique to us. Complex trauma creates situations where we can be regularly activated, while, at the same time, we're unsure of what caused our upset. A comment from a co-worker or not getting an answer to a text message can create a situation where we're spiraling emotionally and don't know why.



Now that you understand what happens when we're triggered, we're going to explore what activates you and how you tend to cope (most of the time). This work will help you shift into a regulated trigger cycle where you feel empowered.



How To Have Difficult Conversations

Every successful relationship requires us to have difficult conversations. It's through difficult conversations that we can understand ourselves and the people we love. Trauma changes how we have conversations. Some of us are terrified of getting in trouble or of saying the wrong thing, or just don't know how to express ourselves. So let's dive in to learn how to have difficult conversations.

Speak for yourself: Speaking in "I" statements decreases the likelihood that we put the other person on the defensive. And, of course, we can only know (and speak to) what we're feeling. For example, instead of saying, "You never listen to me," you can say, "When I talk about how I feel, I would love to know you hear me and understand where I'm coming from."

Ask for what you want: We cannot expect people to just know what we want or to read our minds. What we want or what feels good for us might not feel good to another person. When we directly ask for what we want, we allow the other person to meet our needs.

Examples:

"Right now, I just want to vent. I'm not looking for you to give any solutions. I'd just like you to listen."

"I know you love to catch up right when I get home, but I need a little bit of time to decompress. Can you give me some space for 20 minutes before we catch up?"

Ask what they need: Asking the other person about their wants and needs shows consideration and care. Once they share, it can be helpful to mirror back what they've said so you're on the same page. For example: *"I'm hearing that you want more physical affection, especially before bed. Is that right?"*

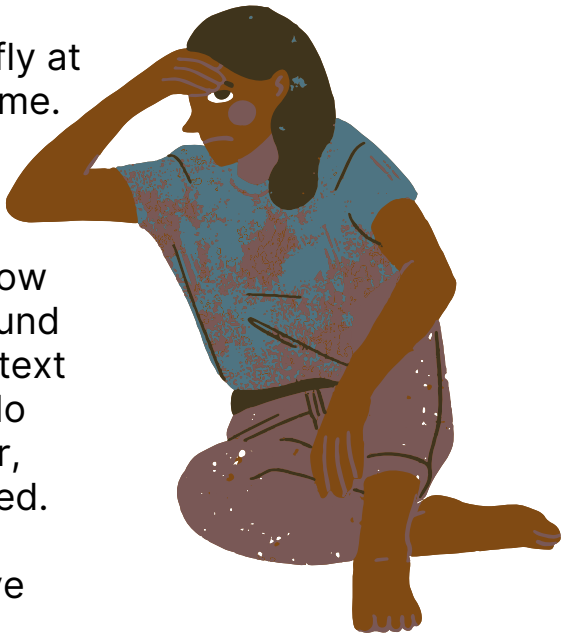
Stay flexible: Think of difficult conversations as an opportunity to come together as team. You might not get every need met or feel exactly the same as your partner, and that's ok. You want to stay flexible and open during the conversation.

Know when you're in the red zone: Any time you feel yourself getting defensive, feeling shut down, or losing your ability to calmly have a conversation, ask for a break and agree on a time to revisit the conversation. It's important that you don't leave the issue hanging.

Jiya's Story

Both of Jiya's parents were hardworking and struggled to get by. She knew when her dad got home that he needed his time to rest, and her mom often was distant and distracted. She has memories of trying to perform dances she made up and trying to get attention in any way she could. At around 13, she stopped trying to get attention from her parents and started trying to get that attention from boys in class. She has never dealt with or even acknowledged the painful loss of her parents' love and affection.

Jiya lived two lives: the life of a social butterfly at school and the life of a quiet "pure" girl at home.



She's been dating Mark for a few months. Everything has been going well, but recently Mark has been busier at work. He let Jiya know this would happen, but Jiya still feels her wound of being ignored activated. She sends him a text message at lunch asking him if he wants to do dinner. He doesn't respond, and an hour later, Jiya can feel herself getting angry and irritated. She sends him a text message: "Nevermind, I already made plans. I can see you don't have time for dinner anyway."

In this example:

JIYA IS ACTIVATED BY: *THE WOUND OF BEING IGNORED (NOT SEEN)*

HER COPING MECHANISM IS: *BECOMING DEFENSIVE AND WRITING A PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE TEXT MESSAGE*

THE END RESULT IS: *FEELINGS OF SHAME, REGRET, AND EMBARRASSMENT*

How to Regulate Your Emotions When Activated

Learning to regulate your emotions helps you to consciously respond to triggers rather than unconsciously reacting. Emotional regulation takes practice, but the more you practice it, the more relaxed and in control you'll feel. You'll be much less likely to go into a shame spiral (*see page 29*) or to rely on dysfunctional coping mechanisms.

1. **Notice what's happening:**
   Right now, my heart is racing, and I feel very irritated or like I'm going to shut down.

2. **The story I'm telling myself about this situation is:**
   I'm telling myself that I'm not getting a response to a message because the person is mad at me or is no longer interested in me.

3. **Name my trauma brain:**
   In the past, I was emotionally neglected or abandoned by people I trusted, so my trauma brain is filling in the story from my past, and it is NOT necessarily true right now.

4. **I use my body to move through the emotion(s):**
   I can dance, shake, scream, stretch, and/or do deep belly breaths to allow the intense energy to pass through me.

5. **I choose to cope in healthy ways:**
   I am going to reach out to a close friend so I can vent about this and then make myself a nutritious dinner to take care of myself. (Healthy coping mechanisms are anything that helps you feel soothed, comfortable, and more connected to your highest self.)

The Window of Tolerance

Every time you practice emotional regulation, you widen your window of tolerance. Your window of tolerance is the optimal zone of your nervous system where you can respond to your emotions in more grounded, healthier ways.

When we feel anxious and overwhelmed we are in: hyperarousal.
When we feel dissociated, shut down, or numb we are in: hypoarousal.

With C-PTSD, it's very common to go quickly back and forth from both states. The more we practice tools to regulate our nervous system, the more time we'll spend in our "green zone" or our window of tolerance.

NOTE: A sign that you're leaving your window of tolerance are feelings of irritability or intense frustration. You might also be clenching your jaw and breathing from your chest.

Hyperarousal

Fight or Flight

Anxiety, panic, overwhelm, hyperactivity, anger, inability to relax

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Time →

Self-regulation, grounded, present, flexible, can access reason and intuition

Hypoarousal

Freeze

Exhaustion, numbness, shut down, depression, shame, poor digestion, disconnection

Are You in the Window?

Use this checklist anytime to check to see if you're within your window of tolerance.

Hyperarousal:



_____ I can't think clearly.
_____ I cry when I go to speak.
_____ I have racing/panicked thoughts.
_____ I can't sit still.
_____ I'm so overwhelmed or angry.

Window of Tolerance:



_____ I can think clearly.
_____ I feel relaxed and at ease.
_____ I can laugh, joke, or play.
_____ I'm capable of making a grounded decision.

Hypoarousal:



_____ I feel "stuck."
_____ I have low energy and am lethargic.
_____ I feel disconnected from others.
_____ I'm dissociated (feel numb or out of body).

Emotional Regulation Practice

The next time you feel yourself getting activated, practice the steps below. The more you follow through and show up for yourself in this way, the more empowered you'll feel. Use the examples given on the previous page to fill in your own answers.

Notice what's happening:

The story I'm telling myself about this situation is:

Name my trauma brain:

Ways I can use my body to move through the emotion:

Possible ways I can support myself:

Healthy Coping Checklist:

- ***Walk around the block***
- ***Call a friend for support***
- ***Journal my feelings***
- ***Let tears flow (cry it out!)***
- ***Cook a nutritious meal***
- ***Listen to a podcast***
- ***Draw/doodle/paint***
- ***Practice deep belly breathing***
- ***Dance or shake***
- ***Lay in the sun/get in nature***
- ***Listen to the birds***
- ***Ask for space or time alone***

Practice Self-Acceptance

Our work isn't to change ourselves or begin an endless or exhausting self-improvement project. A major part of healing complex trauma is actually accepting *all* parts of who we are, not necessarily changing everything. As we practice this work, we will make mistakes and fall into old patterns, sometimes fearing that we're going "backwards."

Practicing self-acceptance, or accepting how we feel and appreciating where we are at, helps us break our deep-rooted shame cycles.

Use the prompts below to practice self-acceptance any time you find yourself being self critical of our experiences.

The emotion that I feel right now is:

I can soothe and accept myself as I am right now by:

Even when I am not the best version of myself, one thing I can appreciate about myself right now is:

Because of this experience, I have learned:

Forgiving Yourself

Many of us have done things we regret while in survival mode. Sometimes we ended up unintentionally hurting others, we stayed in relationships that hurt us, or we gave up on our dreams and goals because we felt like we weren't worthy. Regardless of what we once did, it's now time to forgive ourselves so we can let go and begin to rebuild.

Say these mantras to yourself once a day.
As you say them, begin to slow and deepen your breath as you practice assessing sensations of peace and softness within your body.

Mantras for Self-Forgiveness:

I forgive myself for what I did when I was in survival mode.

I forgive myself for staying in relationships that hurt me because I wanted to be loved.

I forgive myself for the choices I made when I didn't have the tools to do differently.

I forgive myself for not being there for me when I needed me the most.

I forgive myself for staying small and not giving myself a chance to realize my goals and dreams.

I forgive myself for blaming myself for the actions of other people.

I forgive myself, and I am free.

Resilience

Most people who've been through trauma are unaware of how much resilience they've developed. When we didn't grow up in homes with parents who encouraged us or who recognized our strengths, we end up thinking that it's lacking within us. By honoring and recognizing our resilience, we can re-wire our mind and body to feel capable of handling whatever comes our way.

Reflection Exercise:

Think about something very difficult you went through in the past. From that experience, you gained certain traits or deeper awarenesses. (Example: I developed street smarts; I became more resourceful; I understood that if I wanted something in life, I would need to go after it.)

Now use this space to tell the story of your resilience. There's so much power in telling our story. When you're done, read it to yourself aloud and spend some time honoring how far you've come.

My Story of Resilience:

Post Traumatic Growth

Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) is a concept developed by by Richard Tedeschi, PhD, and Lawrence Calhoun, PhD, in 1996 after they discovered that people who have experienced traumatic events are more likely to report positive change in themselves.

Their research found the following positive changes in people who experienced traumatic events:

- Increased Personal Strength
- Greater Appreciation For Life
- Closer Relationships With Others
- New Possibilities
- Spiritual Development

How Post Traumatic Growth Happens

They found that PTG happens in the following ways:

Education: Developing new coping mechanisms, processing how past events have impacted you, and challenging your beliefs/conditioning.

Emotional Regulation: Cultivating the ability to understand and manage negative emotions.

Disclosure: Honoring your individual story and sharing it with others who can support and understand it.

Service: Using your wisdom (or what we learned from our traumatic experiences) to support and empower each other. Acts of service can include volunteering, donating to an organization, or being there for someone you love.

Narrative Development: Speaking about yourself and your life experiences in new, empowering ways.

Doing this workbook is already a sign you're committed to post traumatic growth. Take a minute to congratulate yourself for getting this far! You're well on your way. And, as always, remember to be patient and gentle with yourself as you continue on this journey.

Kendall's Story



Kendall is the oldest daughter to parents who had her at a young age. Both of her parents were highly self focused and distracted with their own over-whelming emotions and stressful lives. Her mother coped with her own insecurities by competing with her children, though she was unaware of it. Kendall had many gifts, but her mother was not capable of nurturing them. Instead, she downplayed them and criticized Kendall.

Kendall coped with the fractured relationship with her mother by abandoning herself and her own needs. Subconsciously, she internalized beliefs about her personal "imperfections" as a result of her mother's near constant criticisms. Kendall was too young to understand that her mother's treatment of her was just a reflection of her mother's own internalized and unresolved insecurities.

To cope with her increasing shame, Kendall became the "troubled, difficult child" who would drink, sneak out, and frequently neglect her self-care. As an adult, she regularly found herself feeling hopeless and angry, and often struggled with the responsibilities of her daily life.

After seeing a therapist, Kendall began to understand that she was suffering from complex trauma. She had shrunk and abandoned herself because her attachment needs weren't met as a child. Within the safe and supportive environment offered by her therapist, she learned how to regulate her emotions, how to practice self-care, and how to have difficult conversations.

After about 6 months of doing the work, Kendall began to see moments of change in herself. She started to see herself as the resilient, strong individual she had become. Most importantly, she started to have compassion for the lost younger version of herself that was under-mothered.

Your Story of Growth

Now that you've read Kendall's story, it's time to start telling your story of post traumatic growth. We are not our past, and we can re-write our story at any time.

I am the hero of my own life because:

Waking Up Your Spiritual Self

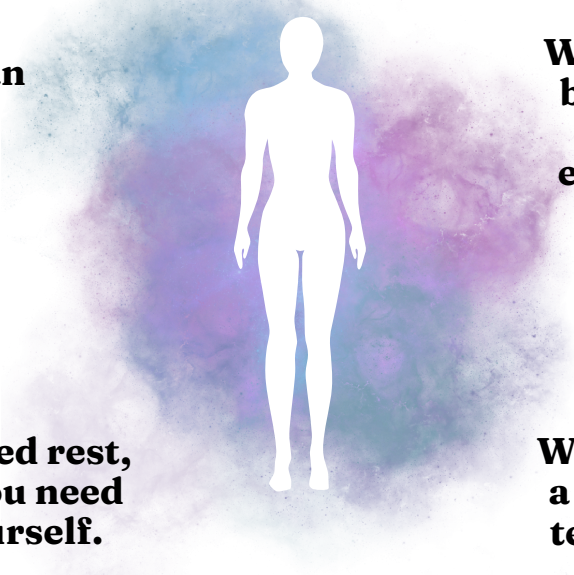
You are **mind, body, and soul**. Our soul, or spiritual self, speaks to us through our intuition, helping to guide us through life. Most of us have had to detach from our spiritual self in order to stay safe. In the process, we stopped listening to or trusting our inner knowing. This leaves us searching for guidance outside of ourselves when the answers actually lie within us.

Your spiritual self is your **authentic Self**. It's without conditioned patterns, learned fears, or defense mechanisms. You might be in the process of waking up to this reality, feeling unsure of who you even are. Waking up can be very painful as we come to the realization that things we've come to believe about ourselves and the world simply aren't true. While this is a painful time, it's a great sign that you're on your way to becoming who you truly are.

YOUR SPIRITUAL SELF KNOWS:

You're more than capable, even when you're overwhelmed or scared.

What you're meant to be doing in your life (purpose/passion) even when there are a lot of opinions or noise around you.



When you need rest, and when you need to push yourself.

When its time to set a boundary and to tell someone "no."

To connect more with your spiritual self, it's important to plan time to be alone in silence. This stillness or solitude lets our spiritual self begin to communicate with us. **Plan a bit of time each day where you just sit quietly with yourself.** You may even ask for guidance and answers, being open to any sensations, images, or voices you may notice. This is how you connect back to yourself.

Reclaiming Your Dreams

Trauma creates heartbreak and disconnection. This can cause us to detach from the things that are meaningful to us. Maybe someone told us our dream was silly or shamed us for even having dreams. Or maybe after experiencing so much disappointment, we stopped having dreams all together. Nothing is more painful in life than having to cut ourselves off from our dreams to keep ourselves safe.

Healing means following our dreams and finding our purpose, even if people don't "get" why it matters to us. We all have unique traits, gifts, and adaptations that help us find and fulfill our purpose. But we have to have the courage to name them to embody them, making them a reality in our lives.

Your purpose might be to have a family, to be a great partner, to build a business, or to be of service to the world.

Here's permission to name and honor your unique dreams and purpose:

Resources:

Below are books, guides, and support groups to help you on your journey of healing from C-PTSD. Trust yourself, follow what resonates, and leave what does not. You are your own best healer.

Books

***How to Do the Work* by Dr. Nicole LePera**

***How to Meet Your Self* by Dr. Nicole LePera**

***How to Be the Love You Seek* by Dr. Nicole LePera**

***Healing Developmental Trauma* by Laurence Heller, PhD, and Brad Hammer, LMFT**

***Radical Acceptance* by Tara Brach**

***The Drama Of the Gifted Child* by Alice Miller**

***Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman**

***When the Body Says No* by Gabor Mate, MD**

***Hold Me Tight* by Sue Johnson**

Support Groups and Websites

CPTSD Foundation:
a guide for the overall healing of complex trauma https://cptsdfoundation.org/

SelfHealers Circle:
a community based, self-guided healing membership.
Get on the waitlist here: selfhealerscircle.com

Find a therapist in your area:
psychologytoday.com (search engine for therapists who are trauma informed and practice trauma healing modalities like EMDR or somatic therapy)

Crisis Hotlines

If you are experiencing a crisis and/or domestic violence,
please use the following hotlines:
National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-272-8255
Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800 799-7233