

# The Post-Traumatic Gazette No 32

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## Don't get over it. Get *through* it.

by Patience Mason

Somehow abusers manage to make many trauma survivors feel guilty for being traumatized. Punitive parents, the military, the Veterans Administration, molesters, rapists, batterers, irresponsible business people whose products, policies or factories traumatize people, self-righteous church people, news media, movies, and TV personalities often seem to be shocked and annoyed by survivors' failure to "get over it." Even loving family members can have this expectation.

Surprise! People don't "get over it." God or evolution designed people so they are affected by what they have been through. Hence the hardened (numb) child abuse survivor who thinks beatings and/or sexual abuse didn't hurt him/her, so what's all the fuss about? Or the vet who never talked about it who finally realizes that means it did affect him, not that it didn't. Or the trauma survivor who struggles alone without information or hope, hiding what he or she believes is weakness, or even insanity, till someone tells him/her about PTSD and how to find help.

An important bit of information: Recovery does not mean getting over it. Recovery means getting *through* it.

One of the reasons a trauma may cause PTSD is that although the person lived through it, he or she actually never had a chance to process the event or events. People don't plan traumas. They are often accidental, random, sudden, violent and always overwhelming.

Nature or God gives human beings the capacity to focus on survival, screening out much of what is happening. That's why the armed robbery or rape survivor remembers the gun but not the guy's face. As a result much of the incident is unavailable to the survivor, feelings, thoughts, physical events, what was said, information which can often free them from reliving the event over and over, if it is processed. There are many ways to process it from narrative therapy to Traumatic Incident Reduction, from poetry to writing a memoir to visual art. Various somatic therapies can deal with bodily tension which often remains, even after psychotherapy.

Getting through this process might actually be easier than living through the trauma, which the survivor has already done, but often it is not. The emotions which were suppressed so that the person could survive are extremely painful. "I can sit through this pain and it will pass," is a good affirmation. "I am more than this pain." and "I survived the trauma and I can survive this pain," are two more.

While the survivor is in pain, family members need resources themselves to help them deal with the pain of not being able to fix the survivor's pain, which is the most natural desire in the world, but not effective when someone is dealing with trauma.

The idea of "getting over" a trauma is very seductive. "Get over" means to prevail against, overcome, and most of us would like to overcome adversity and be

unaffected by it. The phrase "get over it" also has a combative quality. Combative qualities helped each of us survive, but looking on everything as a battle makes recovery difficult. Fighting may have been valuable as a survival tool, but a warlike attitude turns a lot of neutral situations into conflicts. For instance, fighting your natural emotions is a battle that can only be won by emotional numbing, i.e. giving up all your feelings, not just the painful ones. When you do that you have PTSD, so in one sense "getting over" trauma may give you a set of PTSD symptoms which are difficult for you to live with and which make you difficult to live with.

For family members, the idea that the survivor should be over it is also seductive. Perhaps emotional numbing is what attracted you to this person in the first place. Whatever the reason for wishing things were different, living in reality about PTSD and trauma is more likely to result in closeness instead of conflict. I find in my own experience as the wife of a guy with PTSD, that expecting people to be where they are not is ineffective and unkind. I would rather be kind and effective these days.

My impression of people who are trying hard to "get over it," is that they are at war with their nature as human beings. People are affected by what they experience on all levels, physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Trauma changes everything from their physiology to their conception of

“...the choice is not whether to hurt or not to hurt, but what to do while I am hurting.”

*In All Our Affairs, Al-Anon Family Groups*

how the world works.

Getting through it is not an easy task for any trauma survivor. I wouldn't walk off if Bob had cancer, or tell him he should get over it, and I'm not going to walk off because he has PTSD and bad days. I am also not going to push him to follow my directions for recovery, although I do keep my eyes and ears open for help, and try to have an open mind.

“Getting through” is defined as, “To arrive at the end of; finish or complete.” Trauma is overwhelming at the time: processing the events, feelings, thoughts and physical reactions means you will get to the end eventually. It takes time.

Each trauma survivor has to complete his or her life journey. Unfortunately a survivor can't have someone else's life. He or she can only have his/her own, so living it is important. So is dealing with the trauma.

“Getting through” also means “To succeed in making contact; reach. To make oneself understood.” Making contact with others who understand helps a survivor to finally understand him or herself, that being affected is normal and so is needing help. When this finally gets through to a survivor, it makes things easier.

Making contact with family members who understand what you may be feeling and going through is also helpful to the family. The family has a life journey, too, in which trauma figures.

The person who is trying to “get over it” usually suppresses “bad” emotions and tries to tough it out, often alone and without support. This simply stops the healing process. Feelings like grief or anger or guilt get impacted, like a bad wisdom tooth. It takes a dentist

to help with an impacted wisdom tooth, and it often takes a professional to help heal impacted emotions.

Suppressing pain is a survivor skill. It may be the best a survivor can do for years after the trauma. Our society is heavily invested in everyone being “fine,” so there is little support or information available on the effects of traumatic experiences and how to recover. Be kind to yourself if you have been thinking you should be over it or denying that it affected you. Denial is a survival skill when there is no help. It is just not a very effective one. This applies to family members too.

Take your time: Getting through does not mean rushing through. Recovery is not a race. The goal is continuous recovery because events may trigger old reactions and there is always the possibility of new trauma, either to yourself or others. Thinking you “should be over it” can fill you with despair if PTSD survival skills come roaring back (or even sneaking back). Explorers did not give up when they had slogged through a swamp or forded a stream and then found another one further on. Neither should you. During stressful periods, it is good to see recovering as a process, a journey, during which you are learning about yourself, how you react, how you think, and how to make changes if you wish. You are exploring what happened to you and it takes time and goes in stages. This is your journey and the only one who can take it is you.

For family members this can also be a painful journey. It hurts to watch a survivor in pain, and if you've been raised, as I was, to think I should be able to cure all pain, it can make you feel inef-

fective, useless, and even angry. It also hurts to see that actions which were meant to help didn't. It is easy to look at what's wrong with others, but I've found it more effective to focus on changing myself to be the way I'd like to be, supportive, kind, loving instead of controlling and self-righteous.

Getting through trauma and PTSD involves a number of things, including feeling some pretty painful emotions. Learning skills for living is important before you begin to work through trauma, skills like identifying feelings, emotional regulation, how to relate to other people, how to analyze your beliefs, how to ask for what you need, how to express emotions without hurting other people will make the journey easier. Family members may need these skills, too.

I learned such skills in 12 step programs. One advantage of 12 step programs is they are free. Disadvantages are someone who thinks he or she knows it all may want to give you advice. If this is overwhelming to you, you may want to try something else or try another meeting. Advice giving is not what recovering people in 12 step programs do. Going to several meetings, looking for one where you feel safe, is suggested.

Other places you can learn skills include workbooks, therapy, classes, workshops. For instance, learning meditation or conscious breathing can help you sit with feelings that may once have been overwhelming. Beginning to write can help you identify feelings, help you learn how to let go of feelings, help you find out details of what happened or ineffective patterns you may have developed. Going into therapy or getting a sponsor in a 12 step program can help you learn trust,

beginning with identifying someone who may be trustworthy, and then slowly, one step at a time, developing a trusting relationship.

Books have been a big help to me. I learned how to let other people feel what they felt through reading *Parent Effectiveness Training* by Thomas Gordon. I've learned a lot about myself from the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. I learned how to let go by reading Al-Anon literature (it was hard and it hurt to give up the idea that I could fix Bob and remove his pain).

Books like Dena Rosenbloom, PhD and Mary Beth Williams, PhD's *Life After Trauma*, Aphrodite Matsakis' *Trust After Trauma*, or Marsha Linehan's *Skills Training Manual for Borderline Personality Disorder*, are particularly useful to people with PTSD. There are many titles out there. Going to the library or a good recovery bookstore can help you find resources to deal with the problems you want to work on.

Right now, I'm reading a Friends of the Library book sale find, *Talking to Yourself: Learning the Language of Self-Support* by Pamela E Butler, a 1981 book which I find really helpful because my self-talk was, and sometimes is, very cruel and critical. I'm also using *From Sabotage to Success* by Sheri O. Zampelli to try and break out of the pattern I have of being late with the Gazette.

As I have said before, recovery is the reward for taking the time to recover. Reading *Compassion vs. The Cycle of Self-Pity and Self-Criticism in #20* gives helpful ideas if you find yourself lashing yourself to "get over it" rapidly.

As a trauma survivor, you have a lot of resources already which can help you get through the pain of healing.

You may already have a sense of justice if you know it was wrong for you to be mistreated. The emo-

tion of anger grows out of this. The emotion of fear and a body and brain that react to danger come with our human existence. These can be used to prevent further traumatization, although they may also react to non-traumatic situations as if they were confrontations. I have noticed this in myself. Although I am only a survivor of some rather minor traumas, I was extremely defensive and very combative, hearing every suggestion as criticism, thinking any suggestion was bull, and pointing it out in an aggressive style. I still do it sometimes, but now I can make amends when I do. Because someone thinks differently than I do does not mean they are starting a fight or saying I'm wrong. It helps me to keep an open mind and see if some new information or ideas would be helpful to me.

Skills you learned during the trauma, like numbing, avoidance, invisibility and not having needs, can help you get through bad days or days when you have to deal with those who don't understand or don't want to understand. Going numb and fighting for your rights are valuable skills in those circumstances. The ability to focus on what is actually going on (hypervigilance), helps you to protect yourself. These survival skills can be enlisted in your search for recovery. For instance, most groups of trauma survivors that have received any type of recognition and justice, from battered wives to Vietnam vets, have done it through battling the system. Right now police officers, EMT's and firefighters are having to fight for treatment and compensation when they are sidelined by PTSD, as are our new veterans.

You can also utilize the skills you are learning now as you work toward recovery to help you get through it.

Perhaps in therapy you are learning to speak about what happened

for the first time in a safe setting. Breaking the silence, which is often imposed on trauma survivors, is a healing and terrifying thing. Huge waves of emotion are also generated, but talking to someone who is interested and listens is a really healing experience. It is often better not to use family members as listeners because they can be overwhelmed by your pain, or they may be in the "get over it" school of thought (which may be what attracted you in the first place if you thought emotional numbing was recovery) and simply not be qualified to listen without giving advice that isn't helpful. Finding someone trustworthy to talk with is a function of taking the time to share a little and see if they are trustworthy. This applies even to therapists.

Writing may be another new skill, whether you are writing a fourth step in a 12 step program, a journal for your therapist, working in a workbook, or writing a memoir. Maybe you are writing about it instead of acting out in some compulsive way. Writing helps you learn to express feelings. You also experience sitting with feelings, no matter how painful, and letting them pass (right down the end of your pen onto the paper). My husband, Bob wrote honestly about his experiences as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam and it helped him tremendously. I think writing it down got it out of his head.

Some people are better able to express themselves in poetry, fiction or art of some kind. Bookstores have many resources on writing fiction (*Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg) and poetry (*Finding What You Didn't Lose* by John Fox). *The Way of the Journal* and *Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art* are written for trauma survivors. I recommend them.

There is a lot of information

on feelings in the three Numbing issues (13, 14, 15). After feelings have been dammed up for a while they may roar through you as if a dam has broken. See yourself in a sturdy little boat, built of your courageous and creative development of survival skills as you survived traumas, floating on top of this flood. You are not your feelings. You are more than your feelings, and if you go through them, they will pass. Then you will develop confidence that you can get through any feeling, no matter how painful.

Exercise is another skill that can help a survivor work through painful emotions. The latest issue of Prevention magazine [Sept 2000] has a letter, "She Walked Away Trauma," which talks about how a tornado survivor who lost many friends incorporated walking into her healing. Her counselor encouraged her, but it was her idea because she'd read about the emotional and physical benefits. The feeling of competence exercise can give you combines with the creation of endorphins in your brain to improve your life.

Relationships change and grow as each of us recover. Realizing that people change and grow at different rates can keep you working on yourself, instead of trying to fix your partner or kids or friends. I was not aware of how much damage my "helpfulness" was doing to Bob when I was full of advice, but today I am. How do I tell if it is advice? The words "should" "ought" and "just" (if you just...) are all advice indicators. So is repeating. When I am giving information I say it once. Advising (and controlling) is going on and on about it.

That doesn't mean you won't have to repeat yourself, when asking for what you want, because you will. "I hate it when you yell at me,

because it reminds me of my abusive father," for example is a sentence, an "I-statement" that can be repeated in a kind tone whenever it happens, like a broken record. If it turns into a five minute lecture, controlling and advice giving are present. Repeating it many times in one conversation may also be an effort to control. (It is good to think about how much you like being told what to do, if you wonder why someone isn't doing what you say.) I think it takes a few months for most people to hear an I-statement and more time for them to change.

Some of the things that helped me the most through the pain of letting Bob be where he was at in his recovery, through the pain of having been a block to his recovery because I was pushing solutions, and through the pain of remembering and acknowledging my own traumatic experiences involved changing my thinking. This happened through reading, going to a lot of meetings where people said things that really helped me (and changed me), and through the process of working the twelve steps. I can remember feeling like my brain was actually expanding at moments when a new idea or attitude began to mean something besides just words to me. (The longest distance is between the brain and the heart, between knowing something intellectually, and knowing it in your heart.) Changing thinking is something each person has to do for him or herself.

I had to let go of perfectionism, black and white thinking, taking everything personally (maybe Bob was depressed about things that happened in Vietnam, not because I was a bad wife! What a concept! It sounds so obvious now, but believe me it was not obvious to me before I could see it.) Moving from being a person who thought

every good thing that happened was "about f-ing time and wouldn't last anyhow so why be happy," to a person with an attitude of gratitude helped a lot. Bob wasn't perfect but he was alive, and I loved him. Lots of vets had killed themselves. I even grew to be grateful for the drugs and alcohol that had helped him cope when there was no help. Writing a short gratitude list at the end of each day helped me with this. Mine starts with "Arms and legs that work."

I learned to have an open mind, which for someone who knew it all and was always right was such a big change.

I got a lot of support at my 12 step meetings which also helped me. Kindness from others taught me to be kind to myself and really kind to others without rescuing and pushing solutions. Finding information on PTSD really helped. If depression was common then maybe it wasn't my fault. For survivors, information on PTSD may help you see that a problem you have isn't your family's fault. Maybe it is the PTSD.

I also learned that I had to *practice* this new stuff. My mind didn't just open, my black and white thinking didn't just vanish. I had to observe it and write and talk about it and rephrase my thinking over and over. Progress not perfection is one of my touchstones today.

The TRANSCEND program at the Brecksville VA (inpatient PTSD & substance abuse) publishes a card the vets carry with them to help them through troubling incidents which has STOP, BREATHE, THINK, DECIDE on one side. On the other it says: 1. What is the problem I have to solve? 2. I don't need to argue. 3. Relax, slow things down. 4. Take a few deep breaths. 5. I know I can deal with this. 6. Roll with the punches. 7. What do I need to do

to get out of this? 8. This is not going to control me.

The Institute For Rational Emotive Therapy (<http://www.rebt.org>) publishes a card my friend W. [Three Sides to Recovery in issue 28, and PTSD and Parenting, issue 26] carries with her. One side is IDEAS TO MAKE YOU DISTURBED: LOVE-SLOBBISM: I must be loved or approved by practically every significant person in my life—and if I'm not, it's awful! PERFECTIONISM: I must not make errors or do poorly—and if I do it's terrible! LOW FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE: People and events should always be the way I want them to be; life must be easy! On the other side is IDEAS TO HELP YOU FUNCTION EFFECTIVELY: SELF-ACCEPTANCE: It's definitely nice to have people's love and approval—but even without it, I can still accept and enjoy *myself*. FALLIBILITY: Doing things well is satisfying—but it's human to make mistakes. REALISM: People are going to act the way *they* want—not the way I want.

Al-Anon publishes a bookmark called Just For Today which lists 9 suggestions which I have found helpful: live through this day only, be happy, adjust myself to what is, try to strengthen my mind, exercise my soul in three ways (do a secret good turn, do two things I don't want to do, and not show that my feelings are hurt—boy did that piss me off!), be agreeable without criticizing or finding fault or trying to improve anyone, have a program for recovery, have a quiet half hour by myself, and be unafraid. “Especially I will not be afraid to enjoy what is beautiful, and to believe that as I give to the world, so the world will give to me.” All new ideas to me.

A friend of mine, a survivor of childhood trauma, said it helps her

to list her qualities, to appreciate and validate them, and to value herself, not compare herself. Then she makes peace with her flaws and tries to grow into loving herself. It is a process which she finds very healing.

Another friend said at a meeting that she reminds herself that everything is in process, so when she hasn't finished a project, she can tell herself it is in process and her perfectionism departs. She is also “in process” in her recovery, and that idea helps her be kind and compassionate to herself.

I have found that at least for me, being kind and compassionate to myself is a lot more effective than the kind of verbal whippings I used to give myself. “Why aren't you?” —better, faster, more perfect—it didn't matter. I wasn't good enough, far enough along, whatever.

One of the important things you can do for yourself today as a survivor or family member is to look for resources that will help you deal with living with the effects of trauma. This can be as simple as a card of affirmations written out and carried or taking time to meditate and pray each day. You might find a book like Al-Anon's *The Courage to Change*, which has daily readings, helpful, or Pema Chodron's *Awakening Loving Kindness*, or Ruth Fishel's *Precious Solitude*, or Rachel Naomi Remen's *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, or her new book, *My Grandfather's Blessings*. Her grandfather was a rabbi who told her bible stories and then they discussed them. Here's a quote about the story of Jacob wrestling all night with the angel whom he thinks is an enemy attacking him, and when he recognizes him in the morning, wrestling him till he gets his blessing:

It is a puzzling story about the nature of blessings and

the nature of enemies. How tempting to let the enemy go and flee. To put the struggle behind you as quickly as possible and get on with your life. Life might be easier then but far less genuine. Perhaps the wisdom lies in engaging the life you have been given as fully and courageously as possible and not letting go until you find the unknown blessing that is in everything.

The blessing I've found in having a husband who went to Vietnam and came back with PTSD is the knowledge of a reality that it would have been easy to ignore or point fingers at, that trauma affects those who live through it.

I've also been blessed to be able to communicate that information in ways that are readable and helpful to a lot of people. I have been blessed by finding resources that have helped me grow and change into the kind of person I always wanted to be, someone kind and compassionate. (Most of the time.)

No matter what you survived, you did survive. If you work through the pain, at some point, perhaps when you see some crazed child-abuse survivor on TV advocating violence against children and the death penalty for 10 year olds, you will realize that without working through the pain you might have been that person. Now, there's a blessing.

Or you may be working with someone who went through what you went through, and realize that to them, you are a blessing.

# Emotion Focused Therapy

Emotions have an important role in how people function. When emotions such as anger, despair and shame have been evoked by abuse or other trauma to the extent that other emotions have been overshadowed or not experienced at all, they create a set of perceptions which color the world and everything in it. Emotion organizes experience.

Sandra C. Paivio, Ph.D. and Leslie S. Greenberg, Ph.D. who use Emotionally Focused Therapy believe that "it is only through accessing emotion and emotional meaning that emotional problems, such as those stemming from traumatic experiences, can be cured."

In an article in Spring, 2000, Vol. 9, Issue 2, *NC-PTSD Clinical Quarterly* they discussed three main ways that trauma causes emotional disorder.

First, extreme emotional arousal has physiological effects which become part of the survivors coping mechanisms (survival skills) even when the situation is safe: hypervigilance, chronic anxiety, alarm reactions, and constant re-experiencing of fear and shame color reality. This causes survivors all sorts of problems, feeling worthless, overreacting to things, worrying constantly, among others.

Second, survivors tend to avoid emotional experience. Avoiding painful emotions is one of the survival skills which trauma evokes in a survivor to help him or her keep trying to survive. After the trauma is over, it can become counterproductive because keeping a lid on is such an effort. It causes great

stress and tension, and is believed to cause health problems. It may also lead to anxiety and rage, and it means the survivor is unable to feel core feelings and needs. This makes it hard to take care of yourself. Avoidance can also keep you stuck because you can't process and pass through the pain. It denies you the use of some senses, like that instinctive 'he seems nice, but I don't like him,' reaction. Intuition is suppressed too.

Finally, trauma disrupts "beliefs about personal worth, ...a world that is... fair...and other people as benign..." People tend to feel damaged, see the world as unsafe, and see other people as dangerous. This makes it hard to find help.

The emotional part of this therapy is not done until after survivors have developed skills of self-care so that they are no longer constantly triggered into flashbacks and intense arousal states. Once the person is stable and has the skills to comfort and keep him or herself safe, emotional work commences. This is because avoiding painful emotions evoked at the time of the trauma means the survivor doesn't have access to the information which evoked the emotion. If you can't feel the anger that violation evoked in you, you may feel like it was your fault that you were traumatized, rather than putting the blame on the offender. When you can feel anger, you also feel your power. When you can feel sad, you can find ways to soothe yourself, whereas denying sadness keeps you unaware of how to comfort yourself because you are "fine."

EFT sees all the emotions evoked and suppressed during trauma as information you need to heal. This information allows you to change how you view what happened to you, and this will change your view of the world.

The therapeutic relationship may be the first safe relationship a survivor enters. Therapist and survivor collaborate on goals and methods in therapy. Safety and survivor control of the therapeutic process (it goes at the survivor's pace) are two features which also can change your view of the world, contrasting, as they do with the danger and powerlessness of being traumatized. Part of this is also the client relinquishing overcontrol of feelings, i.e. avoiding all feelings, which leads to intrusive symptoms and to isolation. Avoidance is a survivor skill based in fear. It is normal, but not so helpful now. Exploring how and why the survivor avoids things is a gentle way to approach the feared emotions. "One of the goals of therapy is to 'find ways to help you gradually get used to your feelings, so you don't feel overwhelmed.'" Survivors see how hiding from their emotions means they are hiding from themselves.

More information on this type of therapy is available in this issue of the *Clinical Quarterly*, in Sandra C. Paivio, Ph.D. and Leslie S. Greenberg, Ph.D.'s book *Working with Emotion In Psychotherapy*, 1997, Guilford, and in Sue Johnson's 1998 book, *The Heart of the Matter*, Sage Publications. She has also published *Hold Me Tight*, 2008, for the general public.

# *Life After Trauma*

a workbook by Dena Rosenbloom, PhD and Mary Beth Williams, PhD

Dena Rosenbloom, Ph.D., and Mary Beth Williams Ph.D have written an extremely helpful book for trauma survivors.

They work from the premise that:

Trauma affects us by undermining five basic human needs. These are:

- The need to be safe
- The need to trust
- The need to feel some control over one's life
- The need to feel of value
- The need to feel close to others

*Life After Trauma* is designed to help survivors learn to meet these needs. It can be used at home or in conjunction with therapy.

The authors do not feel that every one needs therapy even though they are therapists trained in dealing with trauma. They believe, however, that trauma changes survivors' basic beliefs, sometimes in ways of which they are not aware.

This book is designed to increase a survivor's awareness of core beliefs, to help survivors test their validity, and to help find more healing beliefs if the survivor so desires.

*Life After Trauma* is about dealing with life today, not for working through the trauma. The prologue discusses how the workbook can help survivors. The authors stress finding support, learning self-care strategies, affirmations and soothing self-talk. They discuss when to set the workbook aside and coping with triggers. I found all these suggestions very helpful in dealing

with some emotional upheavals I was having at the time.

Chapter One, "After Trauma: Why you feel thrown for a loop," discusses physical, mental, emotional and behavioral reactions to trauma and ways of checking in with yourself and learning to relax.

The second chapter, "Ways of Coping After the Trauma," contains several coping checklists and questions you can ask yourself for analyzing how you cope, followed by suggestions on how to cope more effectively. They even point out that dissociation can be an effective coping tool if you can evoke it as needed.

Chapter Three, "Thinking Things Through," discusses how to separate facts from reactions and meanings/interpretations, how these may change after trauma and a system for thinking them through.

The next five chapters explore in detail how to meet the five needs, safety, trust, control, value and intimacy. Part of this is identifying beliefs, checking their validity, finding possible alternate explanations or interpretations, and so forth. There are also reminders of self care activities and relaxations exercises throughout the book.

Here's a quote

You can shift your physical and emotional state by, first, reminding yourself that you are in a different time and place from when you experienced trauma initially. You probably have greater choice and control now that you did then. Second, find ways to

comfort and soothe yourself. We have provided ideas for doing this throughout the book, such as relaxation exercises. You may not think they can be much help, but consider this: It is not possible to be tense and completely relaxed at the same time. Learning to relax will directly relieve your tension and anxiety, even if for brief periods initially. Learning to relax can help you feel more in control as well as calmer. The feelings you learn to evoke through self-care and self-comforting exercises are, in many ways, the opposite of those evoked by the trauma. You can learn to use them to help counter and manage negative feelings that now seem out of your control.

There is also a very good appendix on readings, one on finding good trauma therapy, and one for therapists who might want to use this book with clients.

I can't recommend this book too highly. It is healing, deals with the kind of daily problems that trauma survivors face in a sensible, thoughtful, and above all, hopeful way. Things can change one little step at a time. The book offers a lot of steps a survivor can take, always with an emphasis on safety and self care.

The website [www.bookfinder.com](http://www.bookfinder.com) connects you to a huge number of booksellers where you can find new and used copies of most books.

# Writing about trauma

It was reported in the *NC-PTSD Clinical Quarterly* for Spring 2000 (put out by the VA) that many people are helped by simply writing about the trauma without even sharing it with anyone else. Writing seems to help people understand more about what happened and why it had such an effect as well as to change the way they think about it.

James W Pennebaker, Ph.D developed a system of having people write for 3-5 consecutive days, for 15-30 minutes each day. The instructions are:

For the next 3 days, I would like for you to write about your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most upsetting or traumatic experience of your entire life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends, or relatives, to your past, your present, or your future, or to who you have been, who you would like to be, or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days or on different topics each day. All of your writing is completely confidential. Don't worry about spelling, sentence structure, or grammar. The only rule is that once you begin writing, continue to do so until your time is up.

Pennebaker reports that even though people cried or were deeply upset by doing this, months later they found it valuable and meaningful and it had a definite positive effect on their ability, for example, to get a job when laid off, and on physical health.

Pennebaker says if writing is not for you, talking alone into a tape recorder may be as effective.

His subjects were not people who had been diagnosed with PTSD, however, so I strongly suggest doing this with the support of a therapist. Several studies have found it effective with trauma survivors, but it may not be with people with severe PTSD. And it may not be for you. People are different.

Do not do this if it makes you want to hurt yourself or others!

The National Center for PTSD Clinical Quarterly is archived in the PILOTS database: <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/pilots-database/pilots-quick-search.asp>

## Readers write:

Dear Patience,

What helps me most, besides your stuff, is the therapy of personality as described in Emotions and the Enneagram, and The Enneagram Cats of Muir Beach by Margaret Keyes. She sees personality as strategies. People's vision can be warped by looking thru one or more of the old capital sins, greed, pride, lust, cowardice, envy, anger, ambition, sloth, worship of rules. So you and she are helping myself and two comrades to re-enter ordinary life.

Scott