

Goals and Stages of Trauma Recovery

[Excerpted from *Loving Someone with PTSD*, by A. Matsakis, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2011.]

Goals

Sufficient emotional and cognitive processing of the trauma so as to permit identification of triggers, understand the roots of these triggers, and avoid unwanted re-enactments

Increased ability to tolerate the distress associated with re-experiencing, numbing, and hyperarousal symptoms

Increased sense of control/mastery to counteract feelings of powerlessness stemming from the trauma and its aftereffects

Integration of trauma into self-concept, belief system, and world view

Ability to salvage meaning from the experience

Stages of Recovery

As described by Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992, Bantam Books: NY), the first three stages of trauma recovery are

- 1. Stabilization and Safety:** learning to manage strong emotional reactions to triggers and other difficult life circumstances & establishing a safe living environment, safe relationships, and safe health and behavioral habits
- 2. Trauma Processing: Cognitive Reconstruction and Emotional Expression**
J. Herman's "Remembrance and Grieving" Stage
- 3. Mastery and Renewed Relationship with Self, Family & Community**
J. Herman's "Reconnection" Stage

Under certain favorable circumstances, an additional stage is possible:

- 4. Existential/spiritual growth**

Standards of Recovery from Trauma

[The following is adapted from M. Harvey, Ph.D. Chair, “Stories of Resiliency in Trauma Survivors,” *The Treatment of Trauma: Advances and Challenges*, ISTTS. Audio Tape 951STSS International Convention, 1995; and from Salter, E., and Stallard, P. “Post-Traumatic Growth in Child Survivors of a Road Traffic Accident,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol 178:4, August 2004, pp. 335-340.]

“Forgetting” about what happened and the total absence of intrusive thoughts, fears, sadness, and other traumatic reactions is physiologically impossible. Instead standards of recovery from trauma need to include the following:

1. Increased (not total) control over memory:
 - Ability to remember more of what happened
 - Greater ability to stop thinking about what happened
 - Less frequent or less intense reactions to triggers/reminders
2. Memory with manageable emotion
3. Honest efforts to try to manage emotions, even if unsuccessful at first
4. Increased control over behavior
5. Increased self-respect
6. Increased self-care
7. Safe human relationships
8. Salvaging any possible meaning from the experience
9. Increased involvement with people, projects & concerns in the present
10. Increased ability to accept (i.e., experience less shame or guilt) for having or having had post-traumatic reactions
11. For survivors of childhood, repeated, or extreme trauma, the ability to accept long term nature of recovery

(For a fuller explanation of the above standards, see “When Is It Over? The Meaning of Healing or Recovery from Trauma” posted on this web site under Articles on Trauma, a. Impact, Relationships, and Recovery.)