

# **“When is it Over?”**

## **The Meaning of Healing or Recovery from Trauma\* \*\***

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[Adapted from *I Can't Get Over It*, by A. Matsakis, 2002, Oakland; New Harbinger Publications.]

### **Two Flawed Ideas about the Nature of Recovery**

In today's society, there are two popular ideas of what it means to be “healed” or “recovered” from trauma. These ideas are widely held not only by the general public, but by mental health and other professionals and by trauma survivors themselves.

The first of these widespread, but highly flawed, ideas is that recovery is a global, all-encompassing state of positive thinking and action achieved through years and years and years and even more years of counseling. If you aren't always (or almost always) full of optimism and self-confidence, then you are considered to be full of self-pity, “dwelling in the past,” or “resistant” to therapy.

The second erroneous popular idea is that recovery involves eliminating any and all of your post-traumatic symptoms. According to this idea, you can consider yourself having “let go” or having “overcome” your trauma when you no longer think about it or no longer have nightmares, rage reactions, anxiety attacks, low self-esteem, shame, guilt, paranoid thoughts, suicidal or homicidal urges, or powerful desires to enter oblivion by abusing food, drugs, alcohol or money.

If these two ideas are the standards of recovery, then no trauma survivors, even those who have spent forty hours a week in therapy, could ever consider themselves on the road to wellness. Why? Because no matter how strong and determined you may be, you can't fight biology and expect to win.

Some post-traumatic responses, such as the startle response, sleeping problems, numbing, and intense emotional or physiological distress upon exposure to a reminder of the trauma are

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\*\*This material, especially points 1-8, are 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.

survival responses hard-wired into the body. Often they involve involuntary biochemical processes that no amount of “will power” or “determination” can eliminate. Since survivors are constantly being triggered by anniversary dates and other reminders of their particular trauma, as well as by current losses, having some post-traumatic symptoms during these times is almost inescapable.

Furthermore, our world is still full of wars, crimes, vehicular accidents, and family violence. Hence trauma survivors can be re-traumatized not only by their own personal triggers, but by the traumas going on all around them. At the hands of a therapist with little training in trauma work or who is unsympathetic towards traumatized people, therapy can also be so re-traumatizing that many clients feel more disempowered than before they sought help.

Even with the best of therapists, however, counseling usually involves at least a temporary increase in post-traumatic symptoms. Why? Because therapy will inevitably entail some degree of revisiting the traumatic event.

Nevertheless, therapy can help reduce the intensity and frequency of trigger reactions and improve your ability to manage your post-traumatic symptoms. But therapy is not a surgical procedure that promises to permanently remove traumatic memories and their impact from the human mind, body, or soul.

Keep in mind, also, that recovery involves finding out what your triggers are. Some triggers might be readily apparent: e.g., if you were raped, hearing about a rape or seeing someone that looks like your rapist is an obvious trigger that you are probably aware of. However, there may be other triggers that you aren't aware of or that are only revealed over time. Hence you might be having an increase in PTSD symptoms in a situation that you don't realize is a trigger until months or years later.

Don't beat yourself up over this. For people who have been multiply traumatized, such as those who grew up in abusive homes or fought in wars, uncovering triggers can take many years, if not a lifetime. This is absolutely normal — not a sign of “not trying hard enough” in therapy or of lack of recovery.

In sum, it is impossible to hold out the absence of symptoms as a standard of mental health, because, by the very nature of PTSD, such a standard is impossible.

## **Realistic Standards of Recovery**

Since having symptoms (or being triggered) is almost inescapable, your progress cannot be measured by never again having a symptom of post-traumatic stress or never again feeling empty, sad, anxious, enraged, hopeless, or helpless. Instead, consider the following: Do you love yourself enough to try to structure or arrange your life so that you aren't unnecessarily triggered?

No matter how hard you try, however, you do not have the power to arrange the universe so that you are never triggered. There will be times when you have to confront triggers to maintain your home life, keep your job, or take care of important matters. So the important questions are the following:

When you are experiencing post-traumatic symptoms, can you manage them in ways that are not destructive to yourself or others? Can you accept your trigger reactions as normal, or do you experience so much anger, shame, or guilt for having these reactions that you lash out at yourself or others? Do you have safe ways of soothing and comforting yourself?

For example, it is unrealistic to expect that you can get through a terrible anniversary date, such as the day you were raped or wounded, the day a family member committed suicide, or the day your child was murdered, without some kind of emotional pain. The issue isn't whether or not you will suffer, for you inevitably will suffer on these occasions. Instead, the issue is whether or not you are able to endure or tolerate the suffering without damaging yourself or others.

## **1. Increased power or authority over memories**

If you had absolute power over your memories, you would be able to turn them on and off at will; that is, if thoughts of the trauma entered your mind, you could order them to go away and they would. Having absolute power over your memories would also mean that you could remember as many aspects of your trauma as you wished. Yet one of the most troubling aspects of post-traumatic stress is the loss (or diminishment) of your authority or power over your memory. Some survivors wish they could forget or turn off certain memories, while others anguish because they can't remember certain memories. "If only I could forget," some wish; "if only I could remember," wish others.

Traumatic memory is not like other kinds of memory. If you've been traumatized, it is just as normal to remember every graphic detail as it is (a) to recall some details or events, but no

other details, or (b) to recall a traumatic event or detail, but the very next day or some other time to not be able to recall it at all. This doesn't mean you are losing your mind, making up stories, or suffering from brain damage. Such is the nature of traumatic memories.

Given the nature of traumatic memory, progress can be measured as follows:

a. Suppose you remember a traumatic event when you don't want to be thinking about it and then can't stop thinking about it, no matter how hard you try. Progress doesn't mean that you can stop thinking about it automatically and forever, but that the time spent thinking about it decreases over time. If it used to take you two hours to stop thinking about the trauma and now it takes you one hour, then you are a success.

b. If you can't recall a particular traumatic event at all or only recall parts of it, but over time you are able to remember more and more details and the correct sequence of events, this is progress. Similarly, if you couldn't recall where or when you were threatened, but over time can recall more and more about the circumstances surrounding these threats, then, even if you can't remember exactly when and where the threats were made, you are a success.

Clients I have worked with often compare themselves to other trauma survivors as follows: "How come \_\_\_\_\_ remembers the full name, rank, and birthplace of all the guys in his unit but I can't even remember what anyone looked like?" Or "how come \_\_\_\_\_ can talk about her rape, then put it out of her mind and go on with her life, but if I talk about it, I have to take the next day off from work to recover?"

Do not compare yourself to other trauma survivors!! There is no hierarchy of suffering or recovery, and although there are theories about why some people can remember more than others, nobody really knows why.

## **2. Memory with manageable emotion**

What usually happens when trauma survivors remember the hell they've been through is that they remember (a) with little or no emotion at all (numbing), or (b) with overwhelming emotions that feel almost unmanageable in their intensity (hyperarousal or overstimulation). That is, remembering can (a) flatten your emotions so much you feel numb or "dead inside," or (b) bring forth so much emotion that you feel "blown away," as if the feelings associated with trauma — anger, fear, grief, self-hate, confusion — just jumbled themselves into one big ball that has the potential to lay you out flat or propel you into the realm of insanity.

Both numbing and emotional hyperarousal are painful. Regardless of which condition you experience, if the condition feels overwhelming, you may notice that your abilities to think clearly, concentrate, remember, relate to others, or complete certain tasks are becoming impaired. Hence, you begin to feel unsafe, thus creating more fear.

“Recovery” doesn’t mean remembering without a strong emotional reaction (whether numbing or hyperarousal). Rather, recovery means that you can remember your trauma without the numbing or hyperarousal becoming debilitating or incapacitating.

Remember that “feelings aren’t facts” and that feelings are different from behaviors or actions (what you actually do or say). You are making progress if, after having a strong reaction to a trigger, (a) you don’t beat yourself up for having that reaction (no matter how “unacceptable” it may seem to you or others), or (b) although you may not be able to change how you feel, you can exert some choice over your subsequent actions. In fact, you need to congratulate yourself for having even a fleeting thought about doing something to help yourself or about somehow taking control over your behavior.

### **3. Making efforts to manage overwhelming emotions or PTSD symptoms**

Recovery means being able to regulate or manage the anger, fear, numbing, or other response you have to triggers. If not having any kind of reaction to triggers is your standard of recovery, then you can’t take any credit for being able to manage trigger reactions. Some credit needs to be given to trauma survivors who try to manage their symptoms in ways that work for them. These ways include, but are not limited to: deep breathing, relaxation techniques, listening to music, focusing energy on a project, talking to friends, helping others, exercising, writing, becoming involved in artistic or other creative projects, visiting family members or friends, taking care of pets, taking showers, going for walks or otherwise enjoying nature, going to the movies, etc.

The fact that a trauma survivor can manage or at least make an honest effort to manage intense trigger reactions or other symptoms needs to be honored. Even if they just *think* about the possibility of doing something to comfort themselves or doing something constructive despite their emotional pain, and don’t actually do it, they deserve to congratulate themselves. Consider the fact that thinking about doing something to help yourself is the first step towards actually doing it.

#### **4. Increased ability to control your behavior and pursue your goals**

One measure of recovery is the ability to decide how to respond to situations when you are triggered or when you are provoked or irritated by something that happens in your life today. Can you decide how to act? Although you may not be able to control your immediate reaction of numbing or hyperarousal, can you choose what to do next? Or do you automatically act on any destructive impulse that offers relief from your emotional pain?

#### **5. Self-care**

Recovery means increased capacity or willingness to take care of yourself, physically, emotionally and, if you have a spiritual side, spiritually. Are you able to do things which you feel are good for you, even when you don't feel you are worth the trouble? Do you stay away from destructive people and substances, even when you feel like ending it all? Do you ask others for help in order to help yourself grow stronger?

#### **6. Self-respect**

Are you growing in self-respect? Is more and more of your life free from self-doubt, irrational guilt, unnecessary secrecy, and other effects of the trauma? Are you becoming increasingly consistent across various areas of your life?

#### **7. Safe human relationships**

Can you choose non-destructive relationships? Can you select friends and intimates who don't hurt you or cause you to hurt yourself? Can you negotiate in a relationship to have your needs met? Can you compromise with others in a way that doesn't make it impossible for you to survive in a relationship?

#### **8. Meaning**

Another way to measure "recovery" is coming to understand the emotional impact of the trauma on your life. Perhaps then you can begin to make meaning of your trauma, which means, in effect, to find some meaning for your life. Making meaning out of your life means coming to

some decision about what matters to you and what you want to do with the time and energy you have left on this earth.

A therapist or doctor (or even someone who cherishes you) cannot make these kinds of decisions for you. However, your therapist or doctor should (a) believe that, given enough time and support, you will be able to find meaning in the past and in the present, and (b) be willing to support you as you yourself figure out what the trauma meant to you and if any good can be wrestled out from all the bad. Even if you are thinking that “it (the trauma) meant nothing,” or that “it made no sense,” there may still be some meaning in it for you. If you are trying to salvage some meaning out of your painful past, you are on the road to recovery.

## **9. Recognizing personal growth and wisdom stemming from the trauma**

In recent years, it’s becoming increasingly recognized that traumatic experiences can have certain positive effects. Research on trauma survivors (including both adult and child survivors of vehicular accidents, combat, sexual assault, childhood abuse, etc.) has found that a number of these survivors report positive changes in their outlook on life as the result of their life-threatening experiences. These potential benefits include the following: re-evaluating their lives and re-ordering their priorities; increased self-reliance; increased awareness of the brevity and fragility of life; greater appreciation for loving relationships; increased compassion for others; spiritual development; and stronger partnerships and marriages (Salter and Stallard, 2004).

Time does not heal every wound. Certain scars can remain a lifetime. Yet realizing that you may have grown in some ways or developed a greater appreciation for your life and the lives of others, is another sign of recovery.

In sum, recovery from PTSD does not mean a total disappearance of symptoms, but rather a reduction in their frequency and intensity and in the anxiety they produce. Once the symptoms are under control, your life will be more satisfying. Most likely you will still think about the trauma at times, but your experiences will no longer paralyze you or be the major focus of your mental and emotional life.

Recovery also means you’ve learned to measure your growth, not in terms of the total absence of painful memories and emotions, but in terms of your ability to accept, rather than fight, any reoccurrences of your trauma-related emotional and mental states. Using the

traditional standards of mental health, i.e., the ability to work, play, and love, your recovery can also be measured in your increased abilities to be productive, enjoy pleasure, and love yourself and others.

Recovery can also be measured in terms of increased (not total) ability to integrate into society in terms of your work and family; in terms of decreased need to isolate, not the total absence of the need to be alone. As you come to end the isolation, you may come to identify and empathize with others who are suffering, whatever the cause of that suffering, and realize that you are not the only person in the world who has received a “bum rap.”