Why trauma memories are different

Why trauma memories come back uninvited and feel as if they are happening now.

Ordinary memories are like files in a cabinet. They have a label, a date and a beginning, middle and end. You can take one out when you choose, and put it back.

During overwhelming danger, the brain is busy surviving. It does not file. The experience is stored as raw pieces: images, sounds, smells, body sensations and feelings. There is no date stamp to say "this is over".

An ordinary memory

- Has a time and place
- Feels like the past
- Comes when I call it
- Has words and a story
- Fades with time

A trauma memory

- Has no clear time stamp
- Feels as if it is happening now
- Comes uninvited, set off by reminders
- Is mostly sensations and images
- Stays vivid

Triggers

Because the pieces are stored by sensation, anything similar can set them off: a colour, a tone of voice, a smell, a time of year, a feeling in your body. The alarm part of the brain matches the pattern and reacts before the thinking part can say, "That was then."

This is why reactions can seem to come from nowhere.

How this changes

Avoiding the memory keeps it unfiled. In trauma-focused therapy, we go through it carefully, in a safe setting, so the brain can do what it could not do at the time:

1. Put the pieces in order.
2. Add what you know now: that it ended, that you survived, what was and was not in your control.
3. Stamp it with a time and place, so it can be stored as past.

The memory does not disappear. You will still be able to recall it, but it stops coming back as if it were happening now.

In the meantime

Grounding skills help when a trigger hits. They bring your attention back to where you are, which tells your body that the danger is over.

Draws on the cognitive model of PTSD developed by Anke Ehlers and David M. Clark.

My notes and questions

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What the trauma taught me to believe

How trauma may have changed what you believe about yourself, other people and the world.

Name _____ Date _____

After trauma, beliefs often swing to an extreme. Sometimes an old belief is shattered. Sometimes a harsh one seems to be confirmed. Tick any that sound like you.

- [ ] Nowhere is really safe
- [ ] I cannot trust anyone
- [ ] I cannot trust my own judgement
- [ ] I should have seen it coming
- [ ] It was my fault
- [ ] I should have fought back or done more
- [ ] I am damaged for good
- [ ] I must stay in control at all times
- [ ] If I let people close, I will be hurt
- [ ] My reactions mean I am weak

The belief that affects me most

How strongly do I believe it?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

What makes it seem true

What does not fit, or what I would say to someone else in my position

What did I know at the time, and what do I only know now, looking back?

A fairer way of putting it

How strongly do I believe the original version now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

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Guilt and shame after trauma

Why guilt and shame are common after trauma, and questions that ease self-blame.

Many people come away from trauma blaming themselves. It can seem easier to believe "I could have stopped it" than to accept that something terrible happened and was out of your control.

Guilt says
"I did something wrong." It is about actions: what I did or did not do.

Shame says
"There is something wrong with me." It is about who I am, and it makes people hide.

Why self-blame is so common

- **Hindsight.** You now know how it ended. At the time you did not. It is unfair to judge your choices then by what you only learned later.
- **The body takes over.** Under threat, people freeze, go along or go numb. This is an automatic survival response, not consent and not cowardice. It is often what kept them alive.
- **There was no time.** Decisions made in a second or two are replayed for years, as if there had been time to weigh them up.
- **What other people said.** Being blamed, disbelieved or told to move on can leave you ashamed of something that was not your fault.
- **The illusion of control.** If it was my fault, then I can prevent it next time. Self-blame can feel safer than helplessness.

Questions that help

- What did I actually know at that moment?
- What options did I really have, and how long did I have to choose?
- Who was responsible for what happened?
- If this had happened to someone I love, would I blame them?
- What would I have needed, then, to be able to do something different?

Responsibility
Responsibility lies with the person who chose to cause harm, or with circumstances that nobody controlled. Surviving is not something to be ashamed of.

What I would say to a friend who told me this story

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Responsibility pie

For guilt and self-blame: share out responsibility among everything that played a part.

Name _____ Date _____

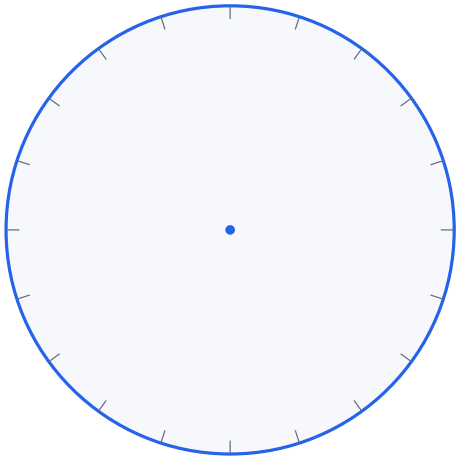
1. Write down what happened.
2. List everyone and everything that played a part. Leave yourself until last.
3. Give each one a share of the pie, as a percentage, and draw the slices.
4. Whatever is left over is your share.

What happened?

Before I start: how responsible do I feel?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Totally



Who or what played a part? (Put myself last)	% share

What do I notice? How does my share compare with how responsible I felt at the start?

Responsibility pies are described by Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky in Mind Over Mood.

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Avoidance after trauma

How avoiding reminders keeps trauma symptoms going, with a list of what you avoid.

Name _____ Date _____

After trauma, it is natural to steer clear of anything that brings it back. In the short term this protects you. In the long term it teaches your brain that the reminders themselves are dangerous, and it shrinks your life.

Avoiding outside things

- Places, routes, people
- Activities, objects, clothes
- News, films, conversations
- Dates and times

Avoiding inside things

- Memories and images
- Feelings
- Body sensations
- Thinking or talking about what happened

What I avoid	What I fear would happen	What avoiding it costs me

Things I do to keep the memory away

☐ Keeping busy ☐ Drinking ☐ Never being alone ☐ Never being still ☐ Staying online

One reminder I would like to be able to face again, and why it matters

Facing reminders is done gradually and with support. This list is a starting point for planning, not a to-do list for tomorrow.

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Reclaiming your life

List what has dropped out of your life since the trauma and plan small steps to bring it back.

Name _____ Date _____

After trauma, life often gets smaller. People stop doing things they used to enjoy or that gave life meaning. Sometimes because of fear, sometimes because nothing feels worth it. Taking these back, bit by bit, is a central part of recovery.

Something I have stopped or cut back	Why it mattered to me	A first small step
Meeting friends for five-a-side	*Fun, fitness, feeling part of things*	*Text Dave and go to watch one game*

The one I will start with, and when

What might get in the way, and what I will do about it

After I did it: how did it go, and how did I feel afterwards?

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Rewriting a recurring nightmare

How to rewrite a recurring nightmare while awake and rehearse the new version.

Name _____ Date _____

Nightmares are common after trauma. They are the mind trying, and failing, to process what happened. A repeated nightmare is also partly a habit, and habits can be changed.

Imagery rehearsal

1. Choose a nightmare. Start with one that is upsetting but not the worst.
2. Write it down briefly, as it usually goes.
3. Change it in any way you like: the ending, the setting, who is there, what you can do. It does not need to be realistic.
4. Write out the new version in detail.
5. Rehearse the new version in your mind for 10 to 15 minutes each day, while awake and relaxed. Do not rehearse the old one.

The nightmare, briefly

My new version. What happens now?

When and where I will rehearse it each day

If you wake from a nightmare

- Turn on a light. Say where you are and what the date is.
- Feel the bed under you. Touch something familiar.
- Get up for a few minutes if you need to. Have a sip of water.
- Remind yourself: "It was a dream. I am awake. I am safe."

Imagery rehearsal was developed by Barry Krakow and colleagues. Many people notice fewer or milder nightmares within a few weeks.

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Understanding dissociation

What dissociation is, why it happens and how to come back to the present.

Dissociation is a disconnection from your thoughts, feelings, body or surroundings. Everyone does it mildly: daydreaming, or driving a familiar road and not remembering the journey. During overwhelming stress it is a way of getting away mentally when you cannot get away physically.

What it can be like

- [ ] Feeling spaced out, foggy or far away
- [ ] Feeling unreal, or as if in a dream
- [ ] The world looking flat, distant or strange
- [ ] Watching myself from outside
- [ ] Feeling numb, emotionally or physically
- [ ] Losing track of time, or gaps in memory
- [ ] Not recognising where I am for a moment
- [ ] Going blank mid-conversation

Why it keeps happening

If dissociation protected you once, your brain may reach for it at any sign of stress, including strong feelings, conflict or reminders of the past. It becomes automatic. It is not something you are doing wrong.

Coming back

1. **Notice the early signs.** Fog, tunnel vision, sounds fading, a floaty feeling.
2. **Move.** Stand up, stretch, stamp your feet, walk.
3. **Wake up your senses.** Cold water on your hands or face. A strong mint. A textured object.
4. **Orient.** Say your name, your age, the date and where you are. Name what you can see.
5. **Connect.** Make eye contact or talk to someone, if someone safe is there.

Reducing it over time

- Learn your triggers and your early warning signs.
- Look after sleep, food and stress levels. Dissociation is more likely when you are run down.
- Practise grounding when you are calm, so it is there when you need it.

> **In sessions**
> If you notice yourself drifting, tell me or give a signal. We will pause and help you come back.

My notes and questions

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Looking after yourself after trauma

Sleep, food, routine, people and pacing in the weeks and months after trauma.

Recovering from trauma takes energy. Looking after the ordinary things gives your mind and body the best conditions to heal.

Body

- **Sleep.** Keep regular bed and wake times, even if sleep is poor. Rest still counts.
- **Food.** Eat regularly. A body low on fuel feels more anxious.
- **Movement.** Walking, stretching, swimming. Gentle, regular movement helps discharge stress.
- **Go easy on alcohol, caffeine and other substances.** They give short relief and make sleep, mood and anxiety worse.

Routine

- Keep some structure to the day: get up, get dressed, eat at mealtimes.
- Do small, manageable tasks. Finishing something restores a sense of control.
- Build in things that are pleasant or calming, even if you do not feel like it.

People

- Spend time with those who feel safe. You do not have to talk about what happened.
- Let people know what helps: company, practical help, or space.
- It is fine to say, "I do not want to talk about it today."

Pace

- Lower your expectations for a while. Concentration and energy will come back.
- Put off big decisions if you can.
- Limit news and social media about the event.
- Expect ups and downs. A hard day is not a step backwards.

> **A small daily check**
> Have I eaten? Have I moved? Have I spoken to someone? Have I done one thing that was just for me?

What I am already doing that helps

One thing I will add this week

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