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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