

## 5: Understand Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



### Remember at Your Own Pace

Both childhood and adult trauma are sometimes suppressed completely until time and other resources are available to remember and heal.

When she was small, Yael's grandfather taught her to play the piano. After each lesson, he caressed her in uncomfortable ways and swore her to secrecy. When her family moved away, Yael left behind both her memory of being molested and her love of making music.

In her thirties, feeling aimless and depressed, she took up piano again and experienced an unexpected flood of emotion and memory.

**Full range of memory.** Trauma survivors experience a full range of conscious memory after the event, from complete details to complete amnesia. Memories return when it takes too much energy to keep them suppressed, or when an essential part of the self is buried along with the memories, and the remaining self gets lonely enough to start digging. Memories can come back suddenly and completely, or gradually over years, or anywhere in between.

**Remembered helplessness.** An event is traumatic when it overwhelms the coping skills available at the time it happens. When the healing process is also overwhelming, it adds to the trauma. While remembering trauma is not fun, it does not have to feel catastrophic.

Much of the distress of remembering is itself part of the past. The memory of being overwhelmed is stored along

with the sights, sounds, and body sensations of the event. Returning memories can include a potent mix of disbelief, shame, fear, rage, grief, feeling conflicted, feeling inadequate, feeling like a failure, and feeling like nothing will ever be the same again.

**Anything you remember is already part of you. You already survived it. It did end.**

**Manage a flood of memories.** When memories return suddenly as flashbacks, the challenge is to contain the flood and remain aware of the resources you have in the present.

**Put a frame around a memory,** imagining that it is behind a window or on a small TV screen that can be muted or turned off. The frame puts a memory in context and makes the events less physically overwhelming. Your whole body can relax as it realizes that the threat really is over.

**Time is an important resource.** Unlike the original event, you can slow down the process of remembering to a manageable rate. You can choose when to invite a memory closer and when to put it aside for later. As your system learns to trust that you will give the memory your attention when you can, it will cooperate when you need to attend to the present instead.

When memories take a lot of your time, attend to present-day tasks in small increments. Think of it as a gift to your future self. If you wash one dish now, there will be fewer to wash tomorrow. At the same time, it is a gift to your past self, helping you connect with your present-day strengths and skills.

**Many coping skills.** In addition to time, you have many other resources that were not available to you during the traumatic event. Notice how your coping skills have grown since it happened. Not only are you confronting a memory

rather than the event itself, but you have more resources available to handle it.

As Yael remembers being molested, she has a lot of resources she lacked as a child:

- An adult body that can defend her
- Friends who believe her
- Control over who she spends time with
- Communication skills to set boundaries and name what happened
- A home far from where the abuse happened
- Access to professional help
- Choice of when and how much to practice piano if it continues to trigger her

What resources do you have available to you now?

**Manage a trickle of memories.** Sometimes, memories hover below the surface for months or years, causing emotional and physical signs of trauma while remaining frustratingly elusive. The challenge is to connect with whatever information is available about the past.

Your psyche has good reasons for not remembering. Take some time to appreciate the self-protection and get curious about what those reasons might be. What would have to change to make it safe to remember?

**Gather the fragments.** When you gather the fragments you do have, they may add up to more information than you realized. You may be remembering sensory information from a time before you had words. You may be remembering confusion and disbelief. Your emotions about remembering, for example fear or frustration, may be pointers to the past.

You can say aloud, "I am willing to remember what

happened.” Take note of any glimpses or impressions you get, no matter how unlikely. When you have more information, you may ruefully say, “Now I understand why I wasn’t remembering that.”

You can try the writing exercise suggested for exploring denial on page 35. You can also try writing or drawing with your non-dominant hand.

**Allow yourself to doubt.** Witness the images inside you without requiring that they match exactly with external reality. You are not looking for courtroom-level proof. You are exploring your personal language of images, sensations, and thoughts. They are there for a reason, even if they do not “make sense.”

Doubt is part of the process. Your trust in your memories will probably veer from 100% to 0% and back again, sometimes rapidly. Allow doubt to come and go, and notice if anything specific triggers doubt for you.

Others may also doubt your memories. You can set boundaries around hearing other people’s judgments or decline to discuss your memories with them further. You can also seek out people who support you in trusting your inner voice.

**Take the reins.** Trauma is overwhelming, but healing does not have to be. The sense of something wrong that must be fixed as fast as possible comes from the past, not the present. There is no time limit or race to be won in your healing. Take the reins and remember at a pace that works for you.