



Heal Around the Edges

As you may remember from getting scraped knees as a child, physical wounds heal from the outside in, at the borders with healthy tissue, where they receive the resources needed to rebuild.

Trauma heals at the borders, too. Somatic Experiencing®, developed by Peter Levine and expanded by Diane Poole Heller, introduces helpful tools to navigate the border between traumatic memory and present time. When we have access to our present resources, we can put traumatic events in context, gradually reducing their power over us. Alternating between a sense of safety and higher levels of stress associated with trauma allows the body to gently discharge stored tension.

Long-term trauma and neglect. Somatic Experiencing applies most directly to acute trauma like a car crash or rape. It works more slowly and indirectly with long-term trauma, where much of the damage comes from neglect and missing resources over a long period of time. If it feels like a technique does not apply, you can skip it, or see if it sparks a tangent for you that does apply.

For pervasive childhood trauma, comfortable calm might be an unfamiliar state. The nervous system might need to gradually learn how to find calm by building stability in the present, and taking it in a little at a time.

Takara's crash. Takara's bike went flying when the car collided with her, and she landed hard on the pavement.

Witnesses immediately clustered around her and a woman put a comforting hand on her shoulder. They encouraged her to lie still, giving her body a chance to react to the impact. Later, she worked through lingering effects with the following techniques.

The goal is to feel better. We tend to believe that more discomfort means more progress. In trauma healing, the opposite is true. The goal is to feel better, rather than being numb or terrified. We need the same attuned care as a crabby infant, inquiring into what we need to feel better, and doing our best to provide it. Enough food, water, rest, and a peaceful environment can go a long way. Gentle rocking and comforting touch can help, too.

Tool: Anchor in present resources. Begin by taking inventory of present-time resources. Take note of present safety, shelter, support, and strength. What do you enjoy about your life now? What do others receive from you that you might also be able to give to yourself? How do others meet your needs? It is worth digging for answers if they do not immediately float up.

As you work with past trauma, bring in awareness of your resources when you start to feel overwhelmed. Bring in the sense of an ally, whether present, past, or imagined. How would it feel to have someone sitting with you who wants you to feel better?

It has been a month since Takara's crash. She looks around her apartment, and notes that she feels safe within its walls. Her friends have given her rides to medical appointments and helped her cook meals while her broken collarbone heals. Takara has felt jittery since the crash, feeling uneasy when she goes outside and finding it hard to sleep. When she focuses on her present sense of safety, she

senses more ease in her body, and breathes more deeply.

Tool: Find a sense of safety. One border around trauma is time. We can look at a time before the trauma began, and a time when it clearly ended. Sometimes, the answer to “When did you first realize you were safe?” is, “I haven’t (yet).” We flee our bodies during trauma, and miss that the emergency is over. Noticing the details of the present can help bring the realization that the worst of the trauma is over.

Takara thinks about the sunny morning of her crash. She was on her way downtown, enjoying the cool air and the strength in her legs as she biked to work. Her body relaxes as she remembers, followed by angry tears about the sudden loss of that enjoyment. When they pass, she feels calmer, less jittery.

After the crash, she first realized she was safe when she started to get up and the woman with her urged her to lie still. As she thinks back, she remembers the nearby construction workers who directed traffic around her, and feels their concerned protection. Warmth moves through her and she trembles for a while, releasing stored stress.

Tool: Put the threat far away. Another border around trauma is space. You can mentally put the threat far away, restrained in some way, and notice how your body responds. Notice the difference between any remaining present-time threats, and the traumatic threats of the past. In this moment, your life is not in danger.

For complex ongoing trauma, the threats might be more abstract, like the threat of abandonment. Putting the threat farther away can let you feel the relative safety of the present.

Takara puts the car that hit her on a different street, so

they would not cross paths. She feels her hunched shoulders soften, and her head turn more freely. Again she trembles for a while as her body responds to the renewed sense of safety.

Tool: Comfortable to uncomfortable. A core trauma healing technique is to move back and forth across the line from comfortable to uncomfortable, keeping your stress level manageable. If you are flooded with flashbacks, you might need outside help to find resources and calmness.

One way to alternate comfort and discomfort is put a threat far enough away to feel safe, and then gradually allow it nearer. Pause when you notice your stress level increase, and return to your resources.

When Takara imagines that the car is approaching her again, she tenses and breathes shallowly. She looks around her quiet apartment and focuses on a favorite painting on the wall to give herself time to calm again.

After discharging stress this way several times, she can see the car's approach, and feels her muscles organize to brake hard and swerve to avoid it. Giving her body a chance to sense into a successful escape resolves a lot of distress around the crash, even though her collarbone is still broken. Afterwards, she no longer feels the need to avoid the intersection where she was hit.

Tool: Add resources. Another way to dial down the intensity of a traumatic event is to add resources. We know what really happened, but we can change how we carry it by editing the story. Add allies, protection, healing energy, or anything else that feels right.

Takara adds protective armor with a soft inner layer, so that when the car hits her, she bounces on the pavement, unharmed. Now, when she thinks of the crash, her body

stays calm. She looks around the scene in her memory, and notices the driver's white, terrified face. She moves from rage at his thoughtless acceleration toward a yellow light, to a more peaceful forgiveness. Her jitters settle down, and she sleeps well that night.

Tool: Edges of memory. Traumatic memory is stored in scattered fragments of sensory impressions rather than in continuous narrative form. When we want to retrieve more information about a traumatic event, we can put gentle attention to the edges of what we know. As we use our tools to release stress, we make room to reassemble the shards of memory. New details and perspectives may continue to surface over time.

As Takara's body calmed from the initial terror, rage, and pain, she retrieved memories of protection and care from others. They had been there all along, but were not accessible until her stress level decreased.

Less is more. Trauma is overwhelming. Trauma healing needs to be gentle and manageable. Touching into the edges of a traumatic event and then returning to safe ground allows the safe ground to expand, eventually healing the whole wound and resolving traumatic symptoms.