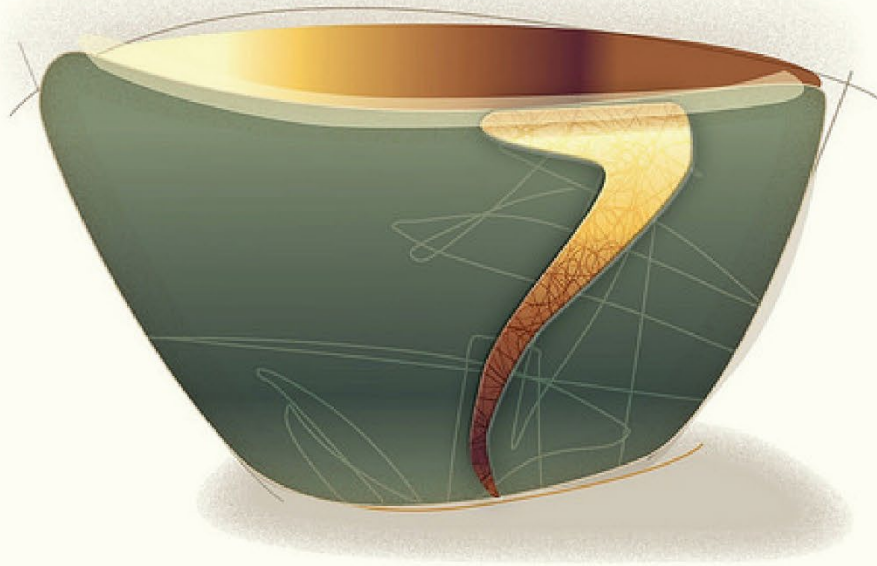


# Understanding and Healing Trauma

2nd Edition

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the fluff-free guide<sup>®</sup>

REBECCA MARKS

# Understanding and Healing Trauma

Second Edition



THE WELLNESS SOCIETY

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Cover illustration by Martin Howard

Kintsugi (金継ぎ) is a Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer dusted with powdered gold. As a philosophy, it treats breakage and repair as essential to the object's beauty.

The Kintsugi approach reminds us that as trauma survivors, we are not fundamentally flawed. We can heal. Post-traumatic growth is possible.

#### Disclaimer:

This book is not intended to be a substitute for the medical advice of a licensed physician. The information provided in this book is designed to provide helpful information on the subjects discussed.

This book is not meant to be used, nor should it be used, to diagnose or treat any mental health condition. The reader should consult with their doctor in any matters relating to his/her mental health. The author is not responsible for any specific health needs that may require medical supervision and is not liable for any damages or negative consequences from any treatment, action, application or preparation, to any person reading or following the information in this book. References are provided for informational purposes only and do not constitute endorsement of any websites or other sources.

Readers should be aware that the websites listed in this book may change.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“It is politically convenient for policy makers to emphasize individual biology in ways that decontextualize mental health problems and thus deflect scrutiny from damaging social systems.*

*Childhood abuse and neglect, adulthood assault, poverty, and discrimination have devastating personal consequences, yet medicalizing subsequent distress permits a level of denial and distancing that absolves those in power of responsibility for addressing injustice and instituting legislative change.”*

- Eleanor Longden et al.

Over 50% of people who try to access mental health services have experienced trauma, defined by The American Psychological Association (APA) as “a person's emotional response to an extremely negative (disturbing) event.”

Despite the indisputable link between trauma and poor mental wellbeing, our current mental health system pays little attention to our past experiences. Our system emphasises labels, diagnoses, biology - not understanding what happened to us and the understandable impact it has on us.

Our goal with this eBook and our accompanying tools is to help you feel validated, understood and empowered.

First, let's clarify: What's classified as trauma?

- One-time traumatic events, such as an accident, injury, or natural disaster
- Childhood physical and/or sexual abuse
- Active childhood emotional abuse (such as parents or carers intentionally scaring, demeaning or verbally abusing you)
- Passive childhood emotional abuse (such as parents or carers being emotionally unavailable, expressing negative attitudes towards you, or having developmentally inappropriate interactions with you)
- Childhood neglect (when parents or carers fail to meet our basic needs such as food, education or medical care)
- Witnessing [domestic abuse](#)
- Experiencing [sexual violence](#)
- Losing a parent or carer
- Being bullied, harassed or socially excluded
- Chronic loneliness
- Experiencing stigma and/or discrimination
- Experiencing poverty

Research shows that experiencing childhood emotional abuse can be just as damaging as experiencing childhood physical and/or sexual abuse.

In a brain scan, relational pain - such as the pain felt whilst being isolated as a form of childhood punishment - can look the same as physical abuse.

Similarly, active and passive emotional abuse can be just as damaging.

There's sometimes a misconception that to experience trauma, there must be a catastrophic event or a definitive moment where the trauma happened.

Trauma that occurs over a prolonged period of time is now recognised and referred to as *complex trauma*.

The label **complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD)** has been given to describe the set of symptoms that can develop in response to prolonged, repeated experience of interpersonal trauma.

C-PTSD is a relatively new diagnostic label. Some of the symptoms of C-PTSD are very similar to those of borderline personality disorder (BPD), and not all mental health professionals are aware of C-PTSD.

As a result, some people are given a diagnosis of BPD or another personality disorder when C-PTSD is more appropriate.

For people on the C-PTSD spectrum, it might not be until much later in life that they start to make comparisons between themselves and others around them, realising how trauma have impacted them.

## THE IMPACT OF COMPLEX TRAUMA

*"If you feel safe and loved, your brain becomes specialised in exploration, play and cooperation; if you are frightened and unwanted, it specialises in managing feelings of fear and abandonment." - Bessel van der Kolk*

Experiencing complex trauma is related to the following difficulties which impact your mental health and wellbeing:

- Experiencing ongoing [physical anxiety](#) (i.e., chest tightness, breathing difficulties, muscle tension, digestive issues, restlessness and an inability to relax)
- Being prone to mental anxiety and [intrusive thoughts](#)
- Living in a state of hypervigilance - being extremely sensitive to your surroundings
- Experiencing intense and/or rapidly changing emotions
- Sleep disturbances
- Problems with feeling and/or expressing emotions
- Difficulties in developing and maintaining relationships
- Feeling as though you're inherently flawed or damaged; experiencing chronic shame
- Feeling as though you're completely different from other people
- Having an unclear sense of identity; relying on other people to define who you are and how we should behave
- Finding it difficult to trust others
- Experiencing fear of abandonment and emotional flashbacks (described excellently in this "Criticism when you've had a bad childhood" video by [The School of Life](#))
- Problems with assertiveness, asking for help and saying no
- Problems with memory and concentration
- Feeling sensations (such as abdominal pain) that have no obvious physical cause
- Addiction problems (i.e., drug addiction, alcohol addiction, gambling addiction, work addiction, love and sex addiction, exercise addiction, shopping addiction)
- Impulsive and/or risk-taking behaviours
- Experiencing derealisation and/or depersonalisation

- Problems with sensory processing and hand-eye coordination
- Eating problems
- Struggling with parenting
- Experiencing hallucinations (we recommend listening to [Eleanor Longden's TED Talk](#) in which she shares her experience of hearing voices)
- Self-harming and/or suicidal thoughts

Another common impact of trauma is trauma reenactment, what Freud labeled "the compulsion to repeat." A common example of this is being attracted to romantic partners who cause us emotional pain.

There are a few theories as to why this happens. Some people believe it's an unconscious attempt for us to resolve a painful situation from the past by mastering a similar situation in the present.

Others think it's related to our brain's association between familiarity and survival - we have a tendency to gravitate towards the known as we've survived thus far.

Another theory is that stress hormones are in some ways addictive. We get used to the stimulation of cortisol and seek situations that maintain our emotional arousal. If we're used to cortisol-fuelled relationships, healthy relationships may have a "boring" feel to them in comparison. It feels like something's missing.

Another reason is the normalisation of abuse, meaning that it feels normal instead of unhealthy.

Whatever the reason, trauma reenactment keeps us stuck. Becoming aware of your patterns and changing them is key to pursuing a more fulfilling life.

In this eBook, we'll describe four important ways you can heal your trauma:

- Self-education
- Trauma-informed treatment approaches
- Physical movement, breathing and meditation practices
- Relational healing

## 1. SELF-EDUCATION

Complex trauma can impact your mind and body in profound ways. The good news is that your brain is plastic, and your body wants to heal.

We can't change what happened to us, but we can change the impact it has on us.



**It's important to note that any approach to addressing trauma is only helpful if you're not too overwhelmed by it physiologically and emotionally. Always [seek the support of a trained professional](#) if you feel overwhelmed by your trauma.**

Educating ourselves about our trauma and the impact it's had on us is the crucial first step to healing trauma.

As one of our respondents said when asked what's helped them the most:

*“For me, it’s been knowledge. Books and conversations and classes. It’s led to understanding of why things happened, why I am the way I am, and it gave me great advice on different things to do at different times that have been really helpful - like identifying cycles or triggers.”*

Our Relationship Challenge is a self-education tool designed to help you improve the quality of your relationships. Access the 7 day Relationship Challenge in our [Free Tools Library](#).

For conversations with others, we recommend the [C-PTSD community on Reddit](#).

Three key insights trauma survivors have during their self-knowledge journey include:

1. The importance of differentiating between mental and physical anxiety
2. The importance of safety
3. The importance of trauma integration and tuning into emotions

### **The Importance of Differentiating Between Mental and Physical Anxiety**

A key learning for trauma survivors appears to be the importance of distinguishing between mental and physical anxiety.

<b>Mental Anxiety Examples</b>	<b>Physical Anxiety Examples</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hypothetical worry (“what if?” thoughts)</li> <li>• Catastrophising - when your thoughts jump to worst case scenarios, i.e., ‘making a mountain out of a molehill’</li> <li>• Threat scanning - when your mind searches the environment for what you fear (consciously or subconsciously), often associated with your mind assigning meaning to innocuous events.</li> <li>• Threat imagery - when your mind produces thoughts or mental imagery around threatening or unwanted situations (a.k.a. intrusive thoughts)</li> <li>• Thoughts and feelings of unreality (of the self and the world)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breathing difficulties (for example, feeling as though you can’t get enough air)</li> <li>• Chest tightness</li> <li>• Heart palpitations, irregular heartbeat, heart pounding and racing</li> <li>• Digestive issues</li> <li>• Muscle tension</li> <li>• Headaches</li> <li>• Restlessness</li> <li>• Ringing in the ear</li> <li>• General aches, pains and tense muscles</li> <li>• Pins and needles; tingling or numbness in the arms, fingers, toes, or around the mouth</li> </ul>

Different methods are required to address mental and physical anxiety.

Our tool [The Thinking Slow Method](#) outlines a step-by-step system to help you reduce mental anxiety.

[This blog post](#) outlines four key ways to reduce physical anxiety (and you’ll also find out how Nikola Tesla can help you understand it!).

Mental anxiety is easier to manage through cognitive-based strategies. If you’ve received Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and haven’t got much out of it, it may be because your main concern is physical anxiety.

## The Importance of Safety

Another common theme throughout trauma healing techniques is that of safety.

Trauma changes the alarm systems in our brain. We become hypervigilant, acting as though we could be facing imminent danger.

Healing trauma is learning how to feel safe in your own body, around others, and in the world.

The combination of working on reducing your mental and physical anxiety can help you achieve this.

## The Importance of Trauma Integration and Tuning into Emotions

Another key learning for trauma survivors is the importance of trauma integration. As Bessel van der Kolk puts it: knowing what we know and feeling what we feel, without getting too overwhelmed by it.

One trauma survivor described it as "being honest with ourselves":

*"It's really hard and I'm rubbish at it, so it comes in fits. But when I am able to sit down and have a dialogue with myself about what I'm feeling (whether it's as small as my feelings about the weather that day, or as big as overwhelming emotions buried under trauma), not what I should or could or would or might be feeling - that's where I find the most joy."*

Another commented:

*"One of my biggest coping mechanisms is intellectualizing emotionally charged stuff, but I'm (very slowly) learning how to pause and take a breath and ask my inner child how she feels, not just telling her what I think."*

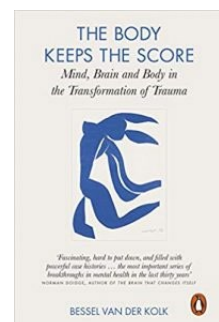
If you feel rejected by your caregivers, you learn to shut down and to ignore what you feel, which changes the wiring in your brain areas associated with bodily- and self-awareness.

The approaches to healing trauma we're describing help to rewire these brain areas. You will gradually become better at tuning into your emotions and integrating your trauma.

**It's worth repeating that any approach to addressing trauma is only helpful if you're not too overwhelmed by it physiologically and emotionally. Always seek the support of a trained professional if you feel overwhelmed by your trauma.**

By the way - if you struggle to finish long books, you can find a short written and audio summary of *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk on [our highly-recommended Blinkist app](#).

Also, there are plenty of YouTube videos featuring the popular author, such as [this one](#).





## 2. TRAUMA-INFORMED TREATMENT APPROACHES

As mentioned, CBT may not always be the most helpful for trauma survivors who struggle with physical anxiety. Trauma causes a build-up of physical anxiety, and our physical responses often become the new enemy. Our biggest fear becomes fear itself.

Here are seven treatment approaches recommended by trauma experts which focus more on the body and past experiences.

### Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR)

EMDR is a way of stimulating the brain through eye movements which appear to make distressing memories feel less intense.

Interestingly, it's thought to be related to rapid eye movement (REM) sleep - the period of sleep in which we're dreaming. EMDR and REM sleep both involve our eyes moving rapidly from side to side.

Research shows that REM sleep is strongly associated with emotion regulation - the more REM sleep we get, the fewer symptoms of depression we experience.

EMDR is thought to promote effective memory processing. It appears to 'free up' trauma, allowing it to 'move over' to regular memory. It helps people put traumatic experiences into a broader context or perspective, appearing more distant, and happening in the past.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Van der Kolk describes a patient who had severe PTSD for thirteen years after a terrible car accident. After just two sessions of EMDR, she transformed from a "helpless panicked victim into a confident, assertive woman."

Find an EMDR therapist [here \(UK\)](#) and [here \(US\)](#).

### Internal Family Systems Therapy (IFS)

IFS therapy was developed by Richard Schwartz, a family therapist who noticed that many of his clients spoke about "parts of themselves".

IFS therapy is based on the premise that we all have various sub-personalities-labelled "parts" that can help us understand ourselves better. In addition, each of us has a core Self, the part of us that is confident, compassionate, and undamaged.

Developing a deeper understanding of our parts and tuning into our sense of Self is how IFS helps us resolve our emotional issues.

IFS teaches us that all our parts have positive intentions for us, even if this seems counterintuitive. Therefore, there's no need to try to eliminate your parts - you focus on harmonising them.

In *The Thinking Slow Method* in [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#), we describe the following parts which you may identify with:

- **The Self-Sacrificer.** Fixates on putting everyone else's needs and wishes before your own, regardless of how you're feeling. This can be particularly detrimental to your wellbeing, resulting in a growing sense of resentment building up beneath the surface.
- **The Overcontroller.** Helps you deal with distress and uncertainty by fixating on having as much control over things as possible (i.e., controlling your food intake, making an excessive number of lists, or using superstitious rituals to increase your sense of control).
- **The Perfectionist.** Protects you from difficult feelings by setting extremely high standards for yourself – academically, professionally, personally and socially.
- **The Victim.** Helps you relieve distress through an over-reliance on others for care and support, keeping you stuck.
- **The Show Off.** Creates a persona of being superior to others to protect you from dealing with distress, which may interfere with your social needs.
- **The Daydreamer.** Distracts you from distress by keeping you absorbed in fantasies and alternative realities, preventing you from being proactive.

If you're interested in applying IFS theory in a self-help context, [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#) includes worksheets and further guidance.

You can find an IFS therapist in the [here \(US\)](#) and [here \(UK\)](#).

### **Somatic Experiencing (SE)**

SE was developed by Peter Levine, author of the popular book [Waking the Tiger](#). [Here he is](#) telling the story of Nancy, a graduate student who experienced unexplainable panic attacks until his vision of a tiger helped him guide her on the road to recovery.

SE is a body-oriented approach to overcoming trauma which teaches simple, useful skills that mobilise the body's self-healing systems.

A therapist trained in this model will guide you through processes which aim to release the 'frozen' physiological states of overwhelm, whilst tracking sensations, feelings, images and movement in your body.

Find a SE therapist [here \(UK\)](#) and [here \(US\)](#).

### **Sensorimotor Psychotherapy**

Sensorimotor psychotherapy was developed by Dr Pat Ogden in the 1970s. [Here she is](#) speaking about how the sensorimotor approach helps heal trauma.

Sensorimotor psychotherapy is a form of somatic psychotherapy that is influenced by neuroscience, cognitive and somatic approaches, attachment theory, and the Hakomi Method. Hakomi is a type of therapy that focuses on mindfulness, empathy and loving presence.

You can search the Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute for a trained therapist [here](#).

## **Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor (PBSP)**

Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor (PBSP) is a body-mind approach created by Albert Pesso and Diane Boyden, professional dancers who found that when they urged their students to express their emotions through movement, they commonly reported a sense of psychological relief.

It involves learning a number of exercises which help you to become more familiar with the sensorimotor and emotional signals that provide information about the body, often in a group setting.

You can find a trained therapist [here \(US\)](#) and [here \(UK\)](#).

## **Therapists trained in The Comprehensive Resource Model (CRM)**

CRM is a holistic therapeutic approach for trauma survivors developed by Lisa Schwarz, a psychologist who has specialised in severe dissociative disorders for over 25 years. [Here's Lisa](#) talking about CRM.

You can find a therapist trained in CRM [here](#).

## **Tension, Stress and Trauma Release (TRE)**

While at a bomb shelter, Dr David Berceli noticed that like animals, it's common for children to shake when they're scared.

When he asked the parents if they ever got an urge to shake, they said they did but they didn't want their children to see that they were scared. This gave him the idea to incorporate our natural tremor reflex into a treatment for stress reduction, called Tension, Stress and Trauma Release (TRE).

The reflex of shaking or vibrating helps to release muscle tension and calms down our nervous system.

[Here's an overview of TRE from Jessica Schaffer.](#)

**Trauma survivors have reported feeling retraumatised by TRE by doing too much too soon.**

It's important to start slowly and gradually build up. TRE practitioners recommend starting with 1-2 minutes 2-3 times a week.

The best option is to find a certified TRE practitioner.

Use [this website](#) to find a certified TRE provider.

You can also find [video tutorials](#) on YouTube as well as in Dr David Berceli's book [Trauma Releasing Exercises](#).

### 3. PHYSICAL MOVEMENT, BREATHING AND MEDITATION PRACTICES

Here are five practices that combine physical movement, breathing, and meditation:

- Yoga
- Feldenkrais
- Tai Chi
- Qi gong
- Tae kwon doe

What makes these practices effective?

- **They train us to notice muscle tension.** For example, in yoga, sequences are designed to create a rhythm between tension and relaxation.
- **They train us to notice and change our breath.** We learn to focus on the inhale and exhale and to notice if the breathing is fast or slow. Yoga also involves counting breaths in certain poses.
- **They increase our bodily awareness.** These practices can help you pay more attention to taking care of your body and listening to what your body needs.
- **Improved relaxation response skills.** As you learn how your breathing is connected with your heart rate, you'll improve your relaxation response skills. A specific pose in yoga called Shavasana, performed at the end of most classes, is especially helpful for this. In Shavasana, you'll be asked to lie on your back with your palms up, and your arms and legs relaxed. When you practice this over time, you'll gradually improve your ability to feel relaxed.
- **You begin to notice the impermanent nature of discomfort.** If a particular pose is uncomfortable or anxiety-inducing, you'll get used to staying with that discomfort until the pose is over, and you'll notice how those feelings subside.
- **They can help you start to approach your body with curiosity rather than fear.** The combination of improved [mindfulness skills](#) and new-found bodily awareness helps you to feel safe in your own body, as you learn to approach your bodily sensations with an attitude of openness and curiosity rather than fear.
- **They help us notice connections between emotions and your body.** The chest, hips, shoulders, and throat are thought to be the primary places where emotional tension resides in our bodies. Once you become aware of where you hold emotional tension, you can focus on movements and postures that target that area and release those feelings.

Experience chest tightness? Here's a [chest pain release video](#) you might find helpful.

A study by Van der Kolk and colleagues found that twenty weeks of yoga practice increased activation of the basic self-system, the insula and the medial prefrontal cortex - profound changes that contribute towards healing trauma.

In another study, they found that ten weeks of yoga practice significantly reduced the PTSD symptoms of patients who had failed to respond to any medication or to any other treatment.

**If you'd rather not be touched, let the instructor know before you start the class as it's common for yoga teachers to physically adjust parts of your body during poses if they feel they can be optimised.**

It's also important to find a slow-paced beginner's class. You may wish to contact the teacher and ask for their advice on whether the level of their class would be appropriate for a beginner wanting to take things slowly.

Alternatively, you could first give it a go in the comfort of your own home with a video like [this one from Yoga with Adriene](#).

## 4. RELATIONAL HEALING

*“Traumatised human beings recover in the context of relationships: with families, loved ones, AA meetings, veterans’ organisation, religious communities, or professional therapists. The role of these relationships is to provide physical and emotional safety, including safety from feeling shamed, admonished, or judged, and to bolster the courage to tolerate, face, and process the reality of what happened.” – Bessel van der Kolk*

### Four Essentials of Quality Relationships

Pete Walker, author of our recommended read [Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving](#), describes four qualities that he believes are essential to the development of trust and subsequent relational healing:

#### 1. Empathy

Feeling truly heard and understood by the other person is a fundamental element of therapeutic human connection.

Many people on the C-PTSD spectrum have suffered greatly because emotionally immature caregivers were unable to display empathy to them as a child.

#### 2. Authentic Vulnerability

This refers to our ability to be open and vulnerable about our emotions with another person.

If we didn't see this being role-modelled by our parents growing up, it makes sense that practicing it might feel uncomfortable.

If you're very disconnected from your emotions, it might even feel out of reach.

Lacking authentic vulnerability with caregivers may also mean that our cravings for this type of connection are intensified in adulthood. This longing could lead to behaviours such as oversharing early in relationships in an attempt - consciously or unconsciously - to speed up the process of connection.

When talking of his experience with his therapist who demonstrated her authentic vulnerability to him, Walker notes:

*“I needed to experience that all the less than shiny bits of me were acceptable to another human being. Seeing that she was comfortable with and accepting of her own unhappy feelings eventually convinced me that she really was not disgusted by mine.”*

Walker calls the opposite of authentic vulnerability 'emotional perfectionism' - the inauthentic display of always being okay.

Perfectionism in general is another common trait of those on the C-PTSD spectrum. It relates to what Dr Paul Gilbert calls 'The Subordinate Approval Trap'.

Whilst everyone seeks approval to a certain extent, it tends to be particularly pronounced in trauma survivors.

You may adapt yourself and your behaviour to please others and gain their approval as a coping mechanism for with chronic shame. This leads to the vicious cycle shown below:



[The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#) includes tools for tuning into and expressing your feelings and needs, helping you escape this cycle.

### 3. Dialogicality

This refers to the equal exchange of speaking and listening that takes place within a relationship.

If one person tends to dominate the conversations, always bringing the focus back to themselves, the other will inevitably end up feeling unseen and unfulfilled by the relationship.

### 4. Collaborative Relationship Repair

This refers to “the capacity to not only survive but also grow closer from the inevitable breaks in attunement that are existential to every relationship of substance”.

Walker explains:

*“I believe one of the most common reasons clients terminate [therapy] prematurely is the gradual accumulation of dissatisfactions that they do not feel safe enough to bring up or talk about. How sad it is that all kinds of promising relationships wither and die for want of the ability to safely work through differences and conflict.”*

Victims of childhood emotional abuse understandably struggle with being assertive in relationships.

When you're led to believe that your needs don't matter, expressing them in adulthood can feel foreign and uncomfortable. It might feel easier to cut people off than deal with the inevitable discomfort involved in collaborative relationship repair. But here's the thing: Healthy relationships involve an ongoing [conflict-repair cycle](#). Problems are an integral part

of all relationships. The key to successful long-term relationships is effective communication throughout this cycle. It's the ability to work through relationship issues in an open, respectful way, being direct about your feelings and needs.

Other struggles that trauma survivors have in the domain of relationships include:

### **Mental Anxiety**

As noted, this refers to unhelpful thinking patterns such as mind reading, catastrophising and emotional reasoning which stem from their lack of trust and sense of safety.

As Van der Kolk explains:

*"Faulty alarm systems lead to blowups or shutdowns in response to innocuous comments or facial expressions [...] Yes, you need to detect whether somebody is getting upset with you, but if your amygdala goes into overdrive, you may become chronically scared that people hate you, or you may feel they are out to get you."*

Experiencing these thinking patterns and associated emotions can lead to relationship conflict and instability when we lack the skills to deal with them effectively.

### **Black and White Thinking**

This is another unhelpful thinking pattern that involves seeing other people as either good or evil. It's also referred to as splitting, idealisation or devaluation.

It can be seen as a defence mechanism – we're overprotecting ourselves due to our past trauma.

Lacking self-awareness around it can lead to us pushing people away. [Here's an article](#) explaining more.

### **Feeling Like You're Completely Different to Other People**

Many traumatised people feel chronically out of sync with others. It can be helpful to remind yourself that there are lots of people out there who feel the same way.

In [The Thinking Slow Method](#), we call this 'The Disconnected Story'.

A simple cognitive strategy for overcoming it is to start focusing more on similarities between you and others. It may be the case that exaggerating differences is a subconscious defence mechanism you use to shield yourself from connection and vulnerability.

Other stories common with trauma survivors are 'The Unworthy Story' (sounds like: "I'm fundamentally flawed") and 'The Abandonment Story' (sounds like: "No matter how good things seem with someone, it's not going to last").

Becoming aware of your personal stories (or 'maladaptive schemas' as they're referred to in Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT)) can help you improve your relationships and mental wellbeing. Be sure to check out [the toolkit](#) if this is something you're interested in learning more about.

All of the struggles we've described are summarised in attachment theory as the **fearful avoidant (FA)/disorganised attachment style**.

There are four main attachment styles that have been studied by researchers and show up in our relationships with caregivers, friends, romantic partners, and even colleagues.

Here are the fundamental differences between the attachment styles:

1. **Secure.** Comfortable with closeness and distance.
2. **Anxious.** Finds distance difficult.
3. **Avoidant.** Finds closeness difficult.
4. **Fearful Avoidant/Disorganised.** Finds closeness and distance difficult.

## Improving Your Relationship Skills

The good news is that you can make great progress through all these interpersonal challenges. There are so many wonderful resources out there to help you!

Our Relationship Challenge takes into account the struggles of trauma survivors. Head to our website to download the 7 day challenge from our [Free Tools Library](#).

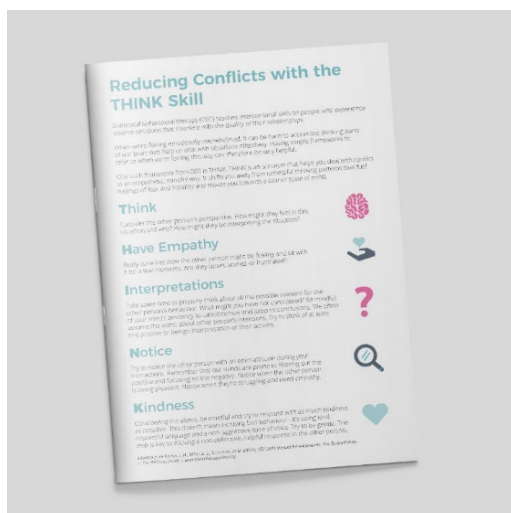
For a deep dive and tools to manage mental anxiety, check out [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#).

Here are some helpful techniques from DBT, developed by Marsha Linehan, and Non-Violent Communication (NVC), developed by Marshall Rosenberg.

“Interpersonal effectiveness skills” is a core component of DBT. A recent example technique from DBT is THINK. THINK is an acronym that guides you through dealing with a challenging interaction.

- **Think** – Consider the other person’s perspective. How might they feel in this situation and why?
- **Have empathy** – Really tune into how the other person might be feeling and sit with it for a few moments.
- **Interpretations** – Take some time to properly think about all the possible reasons for the other person’s behaviour. What might you have not considered?
- **Notice** – Try to notice the other person with an open attitude during your interactions. Avoid filtering out the positives; notice when they’re attempting to make an effort and be pleasant.
- **Kindness** – Try to respond with as much kindness as possible. This doesn’t mean excusing bad behaviour - it’s using kind language.

Download the THINK Skill DBT Worksheet from our [Free Tools Library](#) and review it regularly to become better at handling relationship conflict.





Using kind language can feel challenging when you're feeling overwhelmed with challenging emotions. Learning about NVC can help you with this.

"Non-violent" in the context of communication refers to the ability to speak to others without judging, shaming or blaming them. As a result, the other person doesn't shift into self-defensive mode and is more open to hearing what you have to say - making for an easier conversation.

### Here's the 4-part NVC process:

1. **Observations** – State what's negatively impacting your wellbeing. Do so in the most objective way possible (e.g., "When you walk out of the room when we're arguing...")
2. **Feelings** – Tune into your emotions and express what you're feeling without blaming the other person (e.g., "I feel anxious and upset, and it triggers an emotional flashback...")
3. **Needs** – Express what your need or value is that isn't being met (e.g., "I need some re-assurance that you're willing to work through this...")
4. **Requests** – Make a clear request or offer a solution that would be helpful in future, without demanding it from the other person (e.g., "Would you be willing to tell me you need some time-out in future instead of leaving without saying anything?")

For more NVC guidance, see our [Relationship Challenge](#) tool and [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#).

Relationships are hard work for everyone, but they're particularly difficult for trauma survivors.

However, they're also the greatest source of our wellbeing. The longest-running study on happiness found that the quality of our social connections is the single biggest predictor of wellbeing.

If you're going to make an investment in your mental health, we'd argue your number one priority needs to be improving the quality of your relationships. We hope that all of the resources we've mentioned in here can help you.

## Connecting with Other Trauma Survivors

Connecting with people with shared experiences is particularly helpful for healing as it's conducive to empathy.

When we experience empathy in a relationship, our brain's mirror neurons pick up signals from our partner which communicate to us that we're being heard, accepted and understood. This strengthens our brain's resonance circuits which allows us to engage more easily with other people.

One trauma survivor commented:

*"Making my trauma non-existent is impossible, but I have found a means to making a meaningful purpose through it; advocacy, volunteering and helping other victims of trauma in even the most minute form lightens the weight of my trauma, gives me hope and ultimately allows me to take back the power over my own recovery."*

Another trauma survivor shared how helping others helped them heal themselves:

*"Mentoring and helping someone overcome their traumatic experience was a key part in my own healing process. The first time I felt liberated since my traumatic experience was when I found the courage to say it out loud, without caring about potential consequences. The more I was talking about it to others, the more aware I was becoming and relieving myself from the burden of having to carry a secret for such a long time. This filled me with confidence and helped me start the healing process.*

*"Sharing my experience with people was enough to keep me going, however this passive means of communication didn't help me move much forward. The trauma was still lingering. It wasn't until I met a colleague of mine who had experience something similar, saw her agony, tears and fear, when I realised that, in order to take a step forward, I need to give part of my energy to someone while taking a piece from them in me.*

*"Mentoring someone who had also been through a sexual attack, while helping them regain their confidence in the workspace and in the social sphere, helped me go miles forward with my own healing process.*

*"The realisation that I was not alone filled me with empowerment and the sense of duty to become stronger, in order to continue, as much as I could, to help others get over it the way I am doing so now."*

Our free [Social Connection Planner](#) tool outlines apps and websites for peer support plus meetings and support groups.

## **Healing Through True Others**

*"The speediest and most reliable way to strengthen the prefrontal cortex, and begin to recover the resilience of our true self, is through experiences with people who can be, as the clinical psychologist Diana Fosha puts it, true others to our true self. True others are those who can see and reflect our true self back to us when we have forgotten, or perhaps never have known, who we truly are. They remember our best self when we are mired in our worst self and accept without judgement for all of who we are." – Linda Graham*

Do you think people can't be loved until they love themselves? A trauma survivor asked this question to their therapist.

*"No," she said very sincerely, "Long story short, my answer is no. I think that statement means well, because it encourages you to focus investment into yourself, but I think more often it's taken out of context and does more harm than good. Sometimes we can find love for ourselves within us, and sometimes it's recognized through other people. Sometimes we need that love from others to help us find it in ourselves. So no, I don't think someone needs to wholly love themselves to be able to receive it from others."*

This sentence is worth repeating: Sometimes we need that love from others to help us find it in ourselves. Our partners can act as what Diana Fosha calls our true others - people who see the best in us and reflect that back to ourselves.

Accepting love can help us love ourselves.

Cultivating healthy, loving, trusting relationships helps us heal chronic shame.

## Improving Your Relationships Through the ‘Upward Spiral’

Interestingly, working on your mental wellbeing could result in you feeling more sociable.

It's been found that compared with people experiencing a neutral mood, people experiencing positive mood show greater sociability, sense of connection, self-disclosure, trust in others, and compassion.

Plus, the more time people devote to generating positive emotions in themselves, the more pleasant their interactions with others become. Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, a leading researcher in the field of positive emotions, labels this the ‘upward spiral’ of positive emotions and health.

Her research suggests social connection is a key factor in happiness and is associated with changes in our vagus nerve, an important component of the parasympathetic nervous system which controls our relaxation response.

Fredrickson carried out a study exploring this with Bethany Kok and colleagues in 2013. Half of the study participants attended a 6-week loving-kindness meditation (LKM) course. In the course, they practiced cultivating positive feelings of love, compassion and goodwill toward ourselves and others.

They were asked to practice meditation at home, but how often they meditated was up to them. The other half of the participants remained on a waiting list for the course.

For two months, participants in both groups reported their meditation, prayer, or solo spiritual activity, their emotional experiences and their social interactions within the last day. Their vagal tone - the activity of their vagus nerve - was assessed twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of the study.

The findings suggested that positive emotions, positive social connections, and vagal tone does indeed give rise to an upward-spiral dynamic. They found that greater positive emotions prompted people to see themselves as more socially connected.

Over time, as moments of positive emotions and positive social connections increased, vagal tone also improved.

Fredrickson explains:

*“The daily moments of connection that people feel with others emerge as the tiny engines that drive the upward spiral between positivity and health.”*

Interested in building a LKM habit? Download the free app Insight Timer and search "Loving Kindness Meditation UCLA" to get easy access to [this meditation](#) on your phone. You might also be interested in *The Positive Emotions Journal* included in [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#) to initiate your upward spiral.

## Improving Connection Through Imaginal Nurturing

Research shows that we can obtain the benefits of secure attachment that we didn't have early on through others in adulthood. This can be done through both real face-to-face

contact or in our imagination – amazingly, both are just as effective for rewiring our brain! Our brain doesn't know the difference between imagined and real scenarios. That's why it's possible for our physiology to change just by imagining an experience.

A trauma survivor shares their experience on what's called 'Imaginal Nurturing':

*“My therapist suggested making up an imaginary dad and creating memories of him giving everything I needed as an infant, child and teen. So I did. I found a picture of a dad on Pinterest holding a little blonde girl that reminds me of me and I liked the way he looked. I gave him a job, interests etc. And I've been vividly imagining him treating me the way I wanted starting with infancy.*

*I have only been doing it for two days but my instinct tells me... this is powerful. I do this with bilateral stimulation (tones or tapping).*

*I want to add, that at first I felt guilty. Like bonding with this imaginary man when I have a dad who is trying to engage more and meet more of my needs now that I'm an adult. However, once I got into it, I realized how badly I needed it and stopped feeling guilty. So I have been imagining play, eye contact, telling me how much he loves me, taking care of basic needs, comforting me, etc.*

*My therapist said that it can heal attachment wounds in about six months with consistent work. Anyway, I'm excited! It's so emotional and it feels like my soul needed it badly. I feel like I needed the male figure rather than female adult me doing the nurturing and comforting.”*

## **Improving Relationships Through the Use of Affirmations**

Many trauma survivors find using affirmations to be helpful in the domain of relationships.

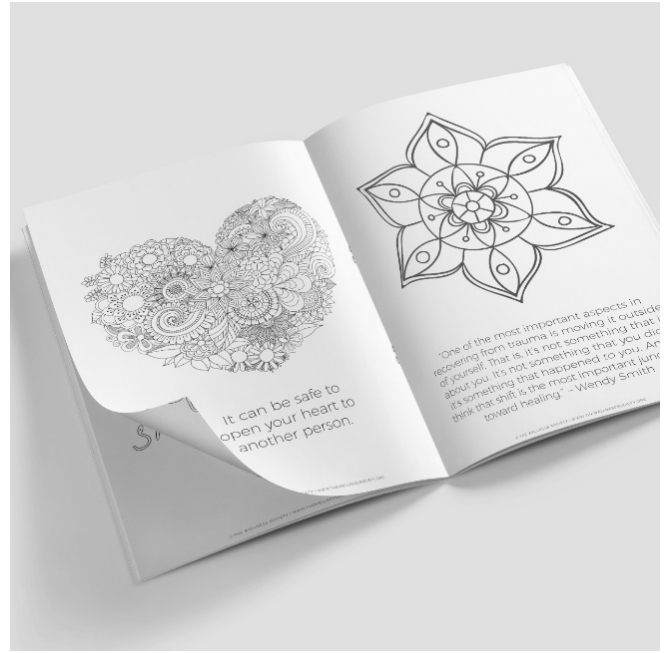
Here are five you could try:

- I deserve to be loved and treated well.
- I have a right to be heard and taken seriously.
- I'm allowed to have feelings.
- All of my feelings are valid.
- It can be safe to let others close.

Why not stick your favourite on a post-it note somewhere you'll see it regularly?

We worked with a group of trauma survivors to produce an extensive list of affirmations plus a set of free printable flashcards – download them for free [here](#). You'll also find an art print and colouring sheets are available to download.

A printable affirmations list can be found on pages 19-20.



**YOU ARE WORTHY  
BE KIND TO YOURSELF  
IT'S OKAY NOT TO BE OKAY  
YOUR EMOTIONS ARE VALID  
YOU ARE NOT FUNDAMENTALLY FLAWED  
YOU DESERVE TO BE LOVED AND TREATED WELL  
IT'S OKAY TO HAVE A BAD DAY, WEEK, OR MONTH  
HEALING IS NOT LINEAR. YOU CAN SELF-SOOTHE  
YOU CAN NURTURE AND PROTECT YOURSELF  
YOU USED SURVIVAL MECHANISMS TO HELP YOURSELF COPE  
YOU ARE SAFE NOW. YOU DESERVE TO HEAL  
WHAT HAPPENED WAS NOT YOUR FAULT  
YOUR EMOTIONAL PROGRAMMING IS NOT YOUR FAULT  
YOU ARE ENOUGH. YOU ARE A GOOD PERSON  
YOU ARE WORTH TAKING CARE OF  
YOU ARE ALLOWED TO TAKE UP SPACE  
YOU DON'T NEED PERMISSION TO EXIST  
YOU ARE ALLOWED TO STRUGGLE  
IT'S OKAY TO CRY. IT'S OKAY TO BE ANGRY  
WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU DOES NOT DEFINE YOU  
FALL DOWN AND BOUNCE BACK UP AGAIN  
BE PATIENT AND LOVE YOURSELF AS YOU HEAL  
IT'S GOING TO BE OKAY. WE ARE NOT OUR TRAUMA  
WE ARE SURVIVORS. AND WE ARE NOT ALONE**

- I deserve to be loved and treated well.
- I have a right to be heard and taken seriously.
- I'm allowed to have feelings.
- All of my feelings are valid.
- It can be safe to let others close.
- I am worthy.
- I am allowed to struggle.
- What happened to me does not define me.
- What happened was not my fault.
- I am allowed to talk.
- I am not alone.
- I deserve to take up space.
- It's okay to be the way I am right now. It is understandable that I felt the way I felt. It is understandable that I did the things I did to cope. It is understandable that I didn't know how to do better.
- I am safe.
- I don't need permission to exist.
- It's okay to have a bad day, week or month. Healing is not linear.
- I fall down and I just bounce back up again.
- This too shall pass.
- I will be kind to myself.
- I have the right to acknowledge your feelings without having to justify them.
- I am not a mistake. I am not fundamentally flawed.
- I am allowed to ask for help.
- I am allowed to celebrate the fact that I survived.
- Change is the only constant.
- It's okay to feel. It's okay to feel bad. It's okay to let it out. It's okay to cry. It's okay to be hurting. It's okay to be angry.
- I will be patient and love myself as I heal.
- I am not afraid to be myself. It is safe to be me.
- I am worth taking care of.
- I will nurture and protect myself.

- It's okay not to be okay.
- It's okay to let go.
- Everyone makes mistakes.
- It is normal and human to make mistakes.
- I am a survivor. My body is a survivor.
- I'm not afraid to fail. Failure isn't permanent.
- My story matters.
- I don't need permission for how I live my life.
- I have nothing to feel guilty or ashamed about. None of what happened to me was ever my fault. I did not deserve to be treated badly.
- I deserve to heal and feel better.
- Everything is going to be okay, even if it doesn't feel like it now!
- It is okay if all I did today was breathe.
- I am enough.
- I am courageous, I am whole, I stand in my power.
- I do not have to prove myself to anyone.
- I can decide what makes me happy.
- I refuse to punish myself for having feelings.
- I will work hard to only allow safe, trustworthy and respectful people into my life now.
- I can bring joy into my life that has been missing during my childhood.
- It's okay to not know what I need.
- When life is sweet, say thank you and celebrate. When life is bitter, say thank you and grow.
- There is no growth without change, no change without fear or loss, and no loss without pain.
- When you forgive, you begin to heal. When you let go, you begin to grow.
- Tomorrow will be a new day.
- I am loved.
- My life and choices are right for me.
- I have the right to go through my own unique process.

## SUMMARY

*“Issues are never resolved once and for all in therapy. Instead, therapist and patient inevitably return again and again to adjust and to reinforce the learning – indeed, for this very reason, psychotherapy has often been dubbed ‘cyclotherapy.’” – Irvin Yalom*

*“Perseverance in our efforts to harness neuroplasticity is the sine qua non of rewiring our brains. By persevering in the use of new tools and techniques, we are stabilising the new neural circuitry so that it can serve as a reliable platform of resilient behaviours, not easily overridden by the pulls of the past.” – Linda Graham*

Above all else, healing from trauma requires your time, patience and perseverance.

As we've heard from the many trauma survivors who shared their experiences for this eBook, healing is possible.

Processing your trauma will help you build your sense of inherent worthiness. With a stronger sense of worthiness, you'll start to establish healthier boundaries and your relationships will improve. With time, you'll begin feeling safer in your own body, with others, and in the world.

### **You have the power to rewire your brain and body.**

Self-education, trauma-informed therapies, physical movement, breathing and meditation practices, and quality human connection can help you heal.

We'll finish with this wonderful quote from a trauma survivor on the importance of patience, wisdom and good experiences:

*“Patience to take however long I need to recover, neither falling into apathy or trying to rush through the process. Understanding it may take time to undo the damage that was done, and that it is worth taking the time to heal.*

*“Wisdom to recognize where the past holds me back and when and where I can change to experience healthier relationships with both myself and others. The wisdom to know when I need to push myself or change, and when I need to show compassion to myself and be okay with who I am. The wisdom to know healthy relationships vs. unhealthy relationships.*

*“Good experiences with others to remind me the world isn't all bad. That abuse is carried out not by an entire group of people, but by individuals who chose, consciously or not, to be that way, and that there are good people out there worth finding. That life can have good experiences out there worth living for and striving for. Good experiences to remind me that there is good in this world, and that I can have good experiences in my life too.”*



## HEALING TRAUMA ACTION PLANNING

*“Writing is a powerful exercise because it serves to clarify our thoughts and feelings in a way that reflection alone cannot. In the act of writing, ideas emerge and are shaped, and this gives us a clearer understanding of who we are.” - Dr Matt Lewis*

We strongly urge you to put pen to paper for this!

Review the questions below and choose three that interest you the most.

Reflect on your three questions in a journal, and outline three action steps you'll take within the next six months.

- *How can I understand myself better?*
- *What steps can I take to reduce my mental and physical anxiety levels?*
- *Am I interested in accessing a trauma-informed therapy?*
- *Am I interested in building a physical movement, breathing and/or meditation practice? How can I make it a regular habit?*
- *How can I start to improve the quality of my relationships?*

If you want plenty of practical tools to help you with these steps, don't forget to check out [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#).



## ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Reddit

Need to vent? Interested to see if anyone relates to your experience? Want to share what you've been through with a supportive community full of wonderful people? We highly recommend getting yourself on Reddit! (Check out [r/aww](#) whilst you're there!)

- [C-PTSD subreddit](#)
- [PTSD subreddit](#)
- [Anxietyhelp subreddit](#)
- [AnxietyDepression subreddit](#)
- [iTunes Link](#)
- [Google Play Link](#)

### Pete Walker's Website

Pete Walker is the author of our top recommended read [Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving](#).

[His website](#) features several comprehensive C-PTSD articles helping you to understand and heal the impact of trauma.

### The Adult Chair Podcast

Michelle Chalfant's podcast The Adult Chair is based on model she developed for understanding of our three primary selves. Like the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model, Michelle talks about parts: the inner child part, the adolescent part, and the adult part. Michelle explains, "When seated in the adult chair, we are in the present moment, dealing in fact and truth (versus stories and assumptions), and we are patient and compassionate. Our adult self is our protector, possessing the strength and clear voice to set firm boundaries. Living from our adult chair we become unstuck and are able to make change happen. Our power resides in our adult chair, and it is here, and only here, that we can become aware of—and overcome—the emotional triggers and negative patterns that hold us back."

We recommend:

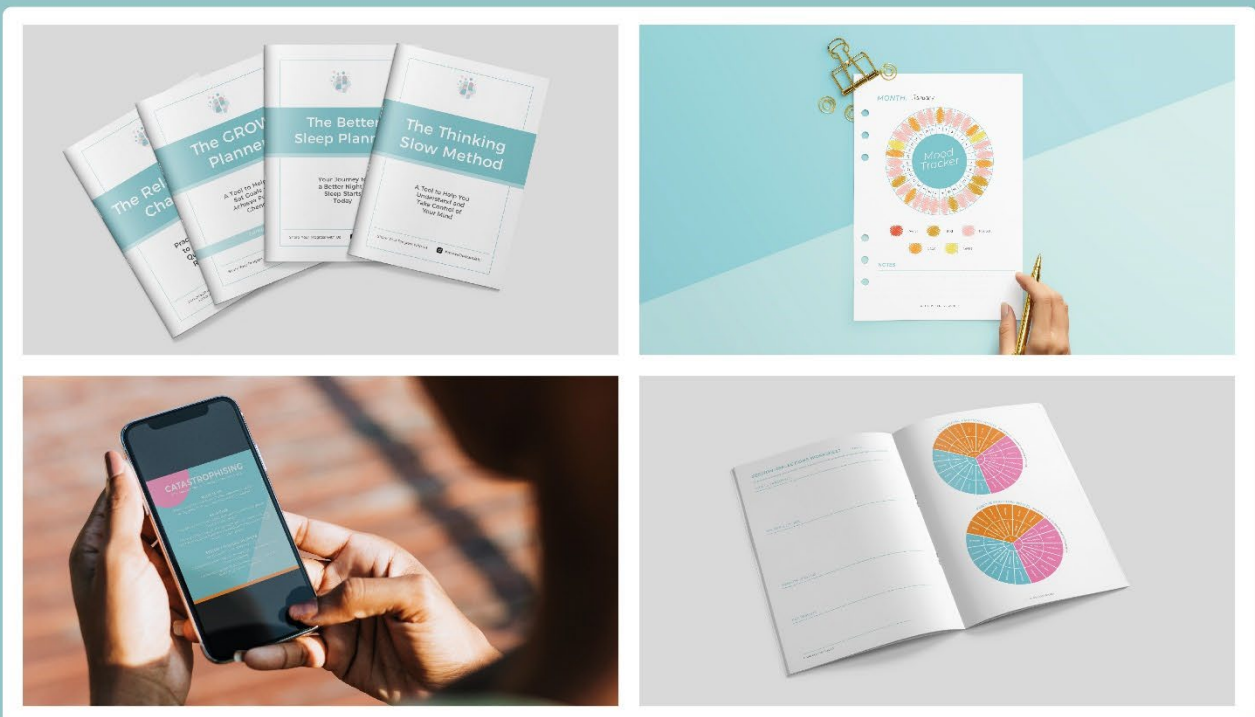
- [Episode 112: Healing Shame](#)
- [Episode 132: Healing Trauma with Courtney Armstrong](#)
- [Episode 36: Mindfulness and Sitting in our Negative Emotions](#)
- [Episode 129: Healing from Abandonment](#)
- [Episode 85: The Power and the Promise of Journaling!](#)

## **Thank You to Our Collaborators!**

A huge thank you to all of the trauma survivors who shared their experiences and insights for this eBook!

This massively helps us improve the quality of our content and we greatly appreciate your collaboration.

# Continue your journey with The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit



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