

The 5 Things you Need to Know to Start Healing From Sexual Trauma

A must read guide for anyone trying to reclaim their
voice, their power and their life back
after sexual abuse



Introduction

If you're reading this guide it's most likely because you experienced sexual assault, rape or long-term sexual abuse at some point in your past and you're tired of feeling like it has a constant and never-ending hold over your life today.

You're tired of living in secrecy about what happened. You're tired of feeling the fear, guilt, shame, anger and other emotions that come with being a survivor of sexual abuse. You're tired of feeling like you're living at only a fraction of your true potential.

The sad truth is that for decades (and really far longer!), people haven't wanted to talk about sexual abuse. They haven't wanted to admit that it's happening in their country, their city, their town or in their family.

The reality is that it's hard enough to face our abuse and admit it to ourselves, let alone to speak about it to anyone else. So many men and women squelch and suppress the trauma they experienced, in the hope that they can just push past it, only to have it unconsciously sabotage and negatively impact their life for decades.

YOU are different though. You're here, you're reading this, and you want to heal. You want to let go of the pain and suffering caused by those traumatic experiences – a burden that you still carry with you today.

Each time even one person has the courage to speak up or admit that they were abused (even to themselves) it shifts the energy in our society. Together we can break the secrecy, shame and silence and together we can begin to heal.

But simply talking about our abuse does not heal it. Although it can bring us comfort (as you'll learn in this guide), talking alone, does not rewire our brain or relieve the symptoms of PTSD and C-PTSD so often caused by sexual abuse.

In this guide, you'll learn things that are critical to know and understand at the start of your healing journey. You'll learn about how trauma is stored in the brain and body; why traditional treatments often fail, and you'll learn what you need to know right now to get you started on your path to healing.

I wish I'd had this guide 15 years ago when I started to recover memories of my sexual abuse; when I started to connect the dots and realize that the fear, shame, guilt, and dread that I lived with daily was not the only way to live. I wish I'd known that it didn't have to be so hard. I wish I'd known that there was hope. There was hope for me and there is hope for YOU too!

I hope you take the time to read this guide in its entirety because I know that it is a powerful first step (or 30th step if you've already been on this journey a while!) towards your healing. :)

I know what you're going through. I've been where you are and I'm here to help.

About – Karen Ortner

If I were in your shoes, I'd probably want to know ~

'Who is this woman talking to me about sexual abuse? Can she truly understand my life and what I've been through? And does she have the real-life experience to help me on my journey?'

So here's a little bit about me...



I grew up in England, the youngest child of an alcoholic father. There was very little safety or security in my life, but plenty of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. While other kids played care-free, my childhood was dominated by panic, dread and fear. To survive, I blocked out and repressed most of the trauma.

I found solace at school. I worked hard, made it into a good college and excelled in my studies. I graduated with an English Literature degree and grew up into a seemingly confident, high-functioning woman with an exciting career in movies, and a love of travel. Underneath this exterior though, I was still an anxiety-ridden people-pleaser desperately searching to fit in and be loved.

In 2005 the world as I knew it flipped on its axis. My mother died of lung and brain cancer after a lengthy illness. Consequently, I decided that I wanted to help people heal the pain in their life. And so, I set about re-educating myself. I trained in NLP and hypnotherapy. I trained in various energy modalities including Reiki and Harmonium Healing.

I first learned about EFT Tapping from my brother-in-law when he made the documentary film 'The Tapping Solution'. I helped out during filming, giving the participants emotional support as they went through a 4 day intensive Tapping program. What I did not expect, however, was that the intensity of the program would trigger me to begin memory recovery of my own traumatic history of childhood sexual abuse.

Memory recovery for me has always been a process of decoding the sensations and symptoms showing up in my body. Fascinated, and eager to meld body-based mindfulness with the psychology of Tapping, I trained in Somatic Experiencing (SE) under Dr. Peter Levine. SE is a body-based therapeutic approach which gently moves the traumatized person from states of rigid fixity to freedom and flow.

Today, I combine EFT Tapping with SE to guide my clients towards feeling more whole and healed. Treating not only the emotional and psychological aspects of trauma, but also the physical manifestations of it, has radically altered the experience of healing for myself and for my clients.

Enough about me though. :) Hopefully that gave you a bit of a glimpse into who I am (although I'll share much more throughout this guide.) Let's get going on YOUR journey and the **5 things you need to know to start (or continue!) your healing journey...**

1 – You Are Not Alone!

One of the most challenging things to understand about healing from sexual trauma is that it is so often shrouded in secrecy and shame and suppressed by societal taboos. Nobody talks about it.

When you think about your experiences...

Do you feel alone? Like an outcast? Do you still hold the secrets and shame about what happened to you deep inside? Maybe this is your first foray into healing from sexual trauma, or maybe you've tried therapy or other healing modalities before, but still you feel lost, frustrated or stuck. Believe me, I get it!

Before I began my healing journey I didn't realize that this kind of thing had happened to other people too...

I thought it was just me. I felt like I must have been a bad child and that my inherent badness had somehow caused the sexual abuse to happen to me. I felt like it was all my fault. I felt incredibly isolated, ashamed and alone. Can you relate?

As a child growing up in a toxic environment, I was given both direct and indirect messaging that the abuse was all my fault. That I had caused the beatings, neglect and sexual abuse. It was my fault for being too noisy, too provocative, too alive. I developed the belief that if I could just do better, be more perfect, more vigilant, then I could have somehow prevented those 'bad things' from happening to me in the first place.

If you're reading this, there's a good chance that you may have had similar experiences and felt this way growing up too. And if you're like I was when I started working on my healing, you may still feel this way, even though you may know logically that abuse is never, ever the fault of the child.

LET'S LOOK AT SOME STATISTICS...

It's important to understand that even though we may **feel alone** in our experience, that is simply not the case. Did you know that (according to the current statistics from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center – NSVRC.org):

1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually abused before they reach age 18.

This statistic is staggering and deeply troubling especially when you consider that:

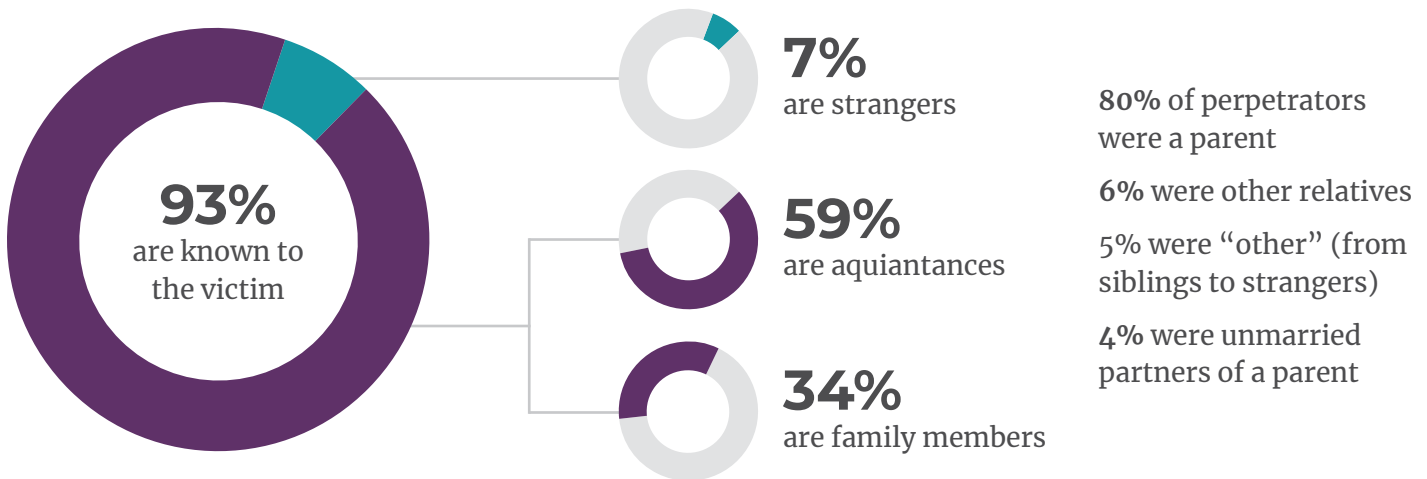
EVERY 92 SECONDS, AN AMERICAN IS SEXUALLY ASSAULTED.

And every 9 minutes, that victim is a child. Meanwhile, only 5 out of every 1,000 perpetrators will end up in prison.

Worse still, child victims often know the perpetrator and **in 34% of reported child sexual abuse cases, the perpetrator is a family member.**

CHILD VICTIMS OFTEN KNOW THE PERPETRATOR

Among cases of child sexual abuse reported to law enforcement



Take a moment to reflect on your own experiences. If for example, you suffered a single-incident sexual assault such as a rape – did you feel that you were in part to blame for what happened? Did you know the perpetrator? Were your clothing choices or the route you walked home called into question? Did you feel guilt and shame for any unwanted arousal that you experienced?

These are all extremely common responses and it's important to know that no matter what you wore, where you were, how you acted or did not act; whether you fought back or froze in paralyzed – terror; and whether you reported or never reported the incident, it was **NOT your fault**. AND you are **not alone** in what you experienced.

You see, the truth is that it is the shame that binds us to our silence and ultimately to our isolation. We can end up feeling that we are ALONE and somehow to blame for what has happened to us.

On the other hand, what if your experience was one of more ongoing sexual abuse, perhaps spanning days, months or even years? Were threats made towards you about what would

happen if you ever dared tell anyone? Was there punishment or withdrawal of love or care? All of these simply serve to isolate the survivor and to make it feel impossible for them to reach out for the help and support so desperately needed.

For me, the high levels of threats, manipulation, gas-lighting, denial and secrecy made it impossible for me to see or even dare to question what was really going on...

That my father was a violent alcoholic, that my mother was not allowed to learn to drive a car, that I was not allowed to have friends over to the house, ever, and much more...

From the outside we may have looked like a perfect family with a nice house; parents with decent jobs and kids turned-out with clean clothes and food on the table. Behind closed-doors however, chaos, dread and terror were all I knew.



Although the type of circumstances and experiences faced may be as unique as each survivor, (be it rape, assault, physical, emotional, sexual abuse or neglect), there is a very common thread that binds us all together. And that thread is the feeling that we are **isolated and **alone** in our experience.**

What I have come to understand however, with my years of research and work with trauma, is that my experience – how I reacted, and how it has affected my adult life – has not been unique to me, but is in fact an extremely common and wide-reaching response to trauma.

So what does this all mean for each of us in our everyday life?

Simply put, what all this means is that every time you go to work, 1 in 4 of the other women there and 1 in 6 of the men are likely to have been sexually abused...

And when you take a yoga class, 1 in 4 of those women and 1 in 6 of those men are likely to have been sexually abused...

And when you go to see a movie, 1 in 4 of the other women in the theater and 1 in 6 of the men are likely to have been sexually abused...

And every time you go to the park, or a school function with your kids, or the grocery store, or a restaurant, or anywhere else in public... 1 in 4 of the other women and 1 in 6 of the men there are likely to have been sexually abused.

Take a moment to let that really sink in and then ask yourself~

How many times have you heard statistics like these, but still somehow told yourself - 'oh that isn't the case in my kid's school, or in my gym class, or in my church or in my town'.

Even thinking about these statistics in relation to our own life can be mind-blowing because it's never talked about and it's easy to think that everyone else looks 'normal' and that this kind of thing only happened to us or only happens elsewhere.

But that's just not true. Survivors are everywhere. In every walk of life. In every race. In every religion. Rich and poor alike. I point all of this out because it's important to...

Truly recognize that you are *not alone* in your experience - in your pain and suffering. And, although you may *feel alone*, the statistics do not lie.

BUT WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO GRASP THAT WE ARE NOT ALONE?

This is the tough part. No matter how much we may logically tell ourselves that we are not alone in our experience and no matter how much light things like the 'Me Too' Movement are able to shed on how commonplace sexual abuse actually is, it still FEELS lonely.

This is because we have carried this burden, this secrecy and shame for so many years alone, and because it is still so rarely talked about.

So what can we do to change things?

Just reading this guide is a great start! :) You see, when we can break our silence, when we can talk openly and safely about our experiences - secrecy and shame can no longer thrive.

Instead, we can begin to build the supportive environment and community necessary for true healing.

When we can see that we are **not alone**, that it was **not our fault** and that other women and men have suffered the same, it lessens the shame, the grief, the loneliness, the pain, and all of the other emotions that we have carried for so many years.

So while it may not sink in quite yet, please know from the bottom of my heart, and after more than a decade of working on my own trauma and helping others with their trauma, that ~ You... Are... Not... Alone.

2 - Improvements Can Be Quick, But True Healing Takes Time...

I know that's not what you want to hear...

You want it all to be over and be over... right now! :) The flashbacks, the panic attacks, the depression, the body memories, the physical illness, to name but a few possible manifestations of your trauma. You want it to stop. To stop affecting your life. To stop holding you back. To stop feeling so raw and painful.

The good news is... you can absolutely see improvements that are life-changing in a short period of time, especially with techniques like EFT Tapping and SE which I'll discuss below. However, depending on the level of trauma that you experienced, true and lasting healing may take longer. For example, a single-incident trauma (such as a car accident) may take less time to process and work through than a more recurrent, pervasive trauma will.

That doesn't mean you should quit, or be discouraged, or give up. Any movement forwards, no matter how slow, is progress. And after all, if you experienced years of sexual abuse and trauma, resolving all of that in a matter of minutes, or hours, or days, is perhaps a teensy bit of an unrealistic expectation for all of us. But...

What you can see is improvements in your everyday experience of life, and ultimately, that is our goal: to have a better quality of life now. We can't change the past. We can't change what happened. We can only change how it is affecting us today.

The effects of sexual abuse are typically long-lasting and healing from it is a journey that takes time. It's easy in today's society and culture however, to want the quick fix. There is heavy emphasis on speed and instant gratification all around us.

Consider your emotional experience of life on average day and then think about the facade of perfection so prevalent on social media. This endless comparison can leave us feeling deflated and not enough; the air-brushing or latest craze of one diet or another; The constant striving for the next thing that promises to fix everything and buy us happiness; the band aid approach to life.

Let's explore this further and do a little exercise to see what your everyday experience is like right now... (scroll to next page)

Take a Minute to Notice How You Feel on a Daily Basis...

Do you find yourself easily able to be in the present moment? Or do you feel like there is something still nagging at you from your past?

VIBRATIONAL EMOTIONAL SCALE

LOVE FREEDOM	JOY HIGHEST EXCITEMENT	PASSION
HAPPINESS COURAGE	GRATITUDE SPIRITUAL CONNECTION	COMPASSION
INSPIRED	CONFIDENCE OPEN-HEARTED	RESPONSIBLE SERENE
EMPOWERED AT EASE	WORTHY LIGHT-HEARTED	EAGERNESS
HOPEFULNESS ENCOURAGED	ACCEPTANCE POSITIVE ATTITUDE	FAITH
NEUTRALITY QUIET CENTER OF STILLNESS		
DOUBTFUL REJECTION	INSECURITY DISAPOINTMENT	LONELY
WORRY IMPATIENCE	PESSIMISM IRRITATION	FRUSTRATION
ANGER HATRED	RAGE FEAR	REVENGE
SADNESS ANXIETY	ABANDONED UNLOVED	ASHAMED
DESPAIR DEPRESSION	DISEMPOWERED HOPELESSNESS	GRIEF

Look at the diagram to the left and notice what emotions you experience in a typical day.

Do you tend towards the joy and gratitude areas or do you veer more towards the anxiety, grief and depression end of the spectrum?

There is no right or wrong. It is absolutely ok to feel exactly how you feel. This just gives you some valuable information about how your trauma has affected you and it tells you about the work you need to do to heal and move forwards into the life you truly deserve to live.

In my case, after a childhood filled with emotional, physical and sexual abuse, I had a hard time trusting anyone.

I had repressed most of what happened to me and so couldn't understand why even on my best days, feelings of anxiety, fear, dread and depression were never far away.

I experienced bouts of suicidal ideation and some days, while driving in my car, I would daydream about wrapping it around a tree. Not really intending to kill myself, but definitely wanting to put an end to the intense pain and suffering that I was feeling.

After reviewing the chart above again, what area do you veer more towards in your every day, average experience? (You will naturally have higher or lower days.)

No one wants to live in pain and suffering. That's why addictions, be it to food, substances, anti-depressants, opioids, shopping or even the distraction of social media are so rife today. It's easier to check-out than it is to face what's really causing us so much pain and suffering. But...

For true and lasting healing to take place, we have to be willing to rip off the band aid; to dive deep and do the real work of healing. While techniques like EFT Tapping and Somatic Experiencing can help to process things faster, you still have to do the work. It's not always easy, but it's worth it.

The reality is that healing from sexual abuse and trauma is not easy work. The effects of it can have profound and long-lasting ramifications.

According to RAINN's current statistics, sexual abuse survivors are:

4 times more likely (than non-survivors) to experience symptoms of PTSD as adults
3 times more likely to experience a major depressive episode as adults

To put it another way

81% of women and 35% of men who have experienced rape or sexual abuse at some point in their lives report significant long-term impacts such as PTSD. (NSVRC.org)

These statistics again show that *you are not alone*. You survived! The fact that the trauma affected your life so gravely back then and still continues to impact every aspect of your life today - is very normal for trauma survivors! :)

In light of these statistics, take another moment to think about how your experience of sexual abuse and trauma still affects your life today...

What emotional, physical or psychological symptoms do you experience? Do you struggle to form or maintain close friendships or intimate relationships? Do you experience hyper-vigilance, anxiety or panic attacks? Do you have physical symptoms or intrusive flashbacks?

For me, PTSD symptoms were showing up in my body. I had terrible headaches and insomnia and when I did sleep I was plagued by violent nightmares. My adrenals were working overtime and my cortisol levels were severely dis-regulated.

I could never relax and hyper-vigilance and panic attacks were my norm. Everyone around me seemed happy and this only fueled my negative self-talk. 'What's wrong with me? Why am I being so ungrateful and selfish? I have a good life so why can't I just be happy? Other people have been through far worse.' But the truth is...

Comparing our trauma to that of other people is never helpful because it's not about what the actual trauma was but rather about how our nervous system experienced it. If it FELT traumatic to you, then it WAS traumatic.

Maybe you can relate to some of this and maybe you're thinking, 'I wish I had someone in my life who could understand what I'm going through, who has been through it too and can help me on my journey'. (I definitely thought that for years!)

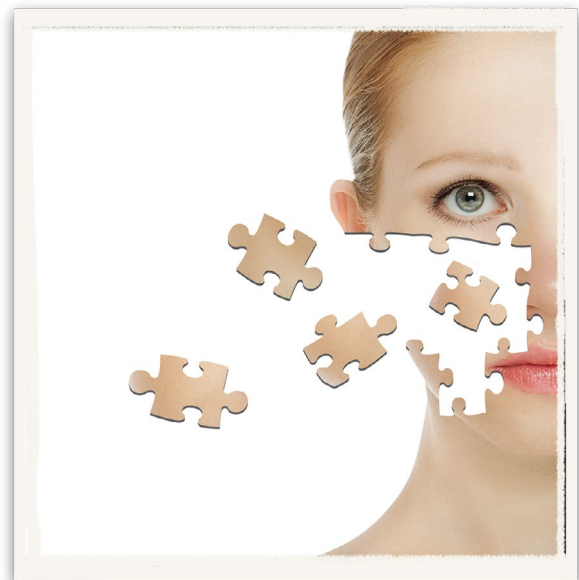
Perhaps you're tired of feeling alone and impatient, wondering 'what do I do next? How do I handle this? What is happening to me and why?'

I know the pain, loneliness and isolation that can come with doing this work.

I know that it can feel like your life is a jigsaw puzzle smashed into a million tiny pieces by the abuse. I know that beginning to put those pieces back together can feel utterly devastating and futile. But, I also know that there is hope. Life can be different. Healing is possible.

Which is why I want to let you know that if you need somebody to help you through this process, I am here for you.

We still have 3 more sections to go but I want to make sure that you know about my work as a trauma coach and that if you do need help, then please sign up for a healing consultation by going [here](#).



If you've read this far, then I know you want to heal from your trauma, and I can help you in your healing journey; this process of re-assembling and re-membering with more clarity and ease. As a Trauma Coach, I can not only hold space for you and assure you that you are not alone anymore, but I can also guide you gently and safely through the steps towards healing.

Secrecy and shame are what kept our silence back then and what can keep us stuck today if we let them. But, when we are finally able to take that first brave step to reach out to find community and support, we change the environment. Shame and self-blame can no longer thrive. We shine light into the dark corners and recesses and in that light, we can begin to heal. Ok, let's keep going with the last 3 things you need to know to start healing from sexual trauma.

If you'd like to set up a FREE healing consultation where we'll go through your specific experiences and where I'll answer questions and give you real, tangible feedback on what I see as your path forward towards healing, make sure to click here or go to <https://www.karenortner.com/work-with-me/> to set up a FREE healing consultation.

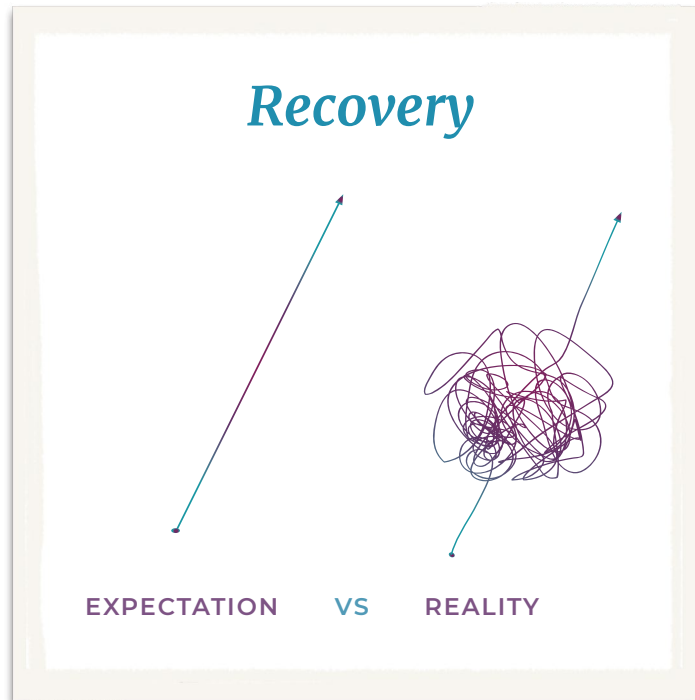
3 – The Path to Healing and Recovery is NOT Linear...

Some people remember their abuse, but may feel as though it happened to someone else.

Some people can rattle off the events, like they're reciting a shopping list, without registering a single emotion about what happened.

Other people have no conscious memories, but may experience body or somatic symptoms with no clear understanding about why they are being triggered so intensely by a movie, a red truck or the smell of coffee.

All of these are very common responses to sexual trauma or abuse.



When we begin to heal, we often hold a strong hope or expectation that our progress will be linear and consistent. We think that if we just put in 'X' number hours work with a therapist or coach, then we'll heal at 'X' rate of speed and be better in 'X' amount of time.

Unfortunately, healing from trauma does not fit into a nice neat box or a math equation. The reality is just not that simple.

Healing is not clear-cut and straight-forward because there are so many layers to uncover and so many negative emotions, limiting beliefs, and past traumas to overcome, many of which are not conscious or easy to find.

The healing journey can at times feel like trying to untangle a big bowl of spaghetti-where just when you think you've isolated and pulled out a single strand to work on, you realize that that piece of spaghetti is actually attached to 5 other pieces, all inter-twined and covered in the same sauce. Yes - healing from trauma can be a confusing and messy process!

Our healing covers everything from combating the terrible and damaging things our abuser's may have told us about it being our fault. To dealing with panic attacks and terror brought on by threats of punishment if we were to break our silence. To often-times having to also overcome a toxic environment where denial, gas-lighting, manipulation, fear, and betrayal ran rife!

Some survivors (perhaps you're one of them!) give themselves a really hard time – thinking that what happened to them wasn't bad enough to qualify as abuse. They compare their experience to that of other's saying 'it only happened to me once' or 'it wasn't incest – he was just a family friend'.

But the truth is that just because the abuse someone else experienced may have been 'worse' than yours – this does not lessen your own suffering or your need or right to heal. It is important to remember that the trauma of the abuse is not actually reliant upon what physically took place. Instead, it is about how you felt back then as a child and how you feel as an adult today...

Your trust was shattered. Your boundaries were invaded and your world was never the same again.

A crucial shift in healing for many survivor's happens when they are finally able to acknowledge and believe that the abuse really happened at all.

For some time, survivors may vacillate between truly believing one moment, and completely invalidating themselves the next. To get to this point of certainty can take a great deal of work and there are usually many ups and downs along the way. This can be extremely frustrating and demoralizing and can even lead to some survivors walking away from their healing path entirely.

But, it doesn't have to be this way, if we can begin to understand that when we face these apparent set-backs or reach a healing plateau, we have not failed. If you exercise your body and you do the same workout every day, eventually your body will become used to the workout and your weight and fitness levels will reach stagnation or plateau. The same is true of our healing journey. We can avoid these plateaus in a number of ways.

We can first hold onto the cognitive understanding and awareness that healing is not linear.

Then we can hold ourselves in a space of kindness and compassion. This is challenging work which takes a tremendous amount of strength and courage to even begin.

Next we can employ a few different tools (like EFT Tapping and Somatic Experiencing which I'll discuss further in Step 5) that will help us find our flow again when we feel blocked and stuck on our journey.

But to really understand the non-linear nature of the healing process, we must understand how the body responds to threat and trauma...

UNDERSTANDING THE FIGHT, FLIGHT AND FREEZE RESPONSES TO TRAUMA...

Have you ever driven home and realized you have absolutely no idea how you got there?

Or perhaps you've been so engrossed in a book that you lost all track of time? If so, it's likely that you were experiencing a very mild form of dissociation.

That dazed, fuzzy feeling of losing touch with your thoughts, feelings or actions is extremely common amongst trauma survivors, but not in a good way, and not in a way where we can quickly snap back to reality.



I spent years staying far, far away from my body and the reality of the trauma I had experienced as a child. It was not safe to feel body sensations or emotions. I learned very young that freeze and dissociation were my best chance at survival.

As a little girl I could not run away and I could not fight. My best and only choice was to freeze and disappear. I became very adept at dissociating.

You see, when faced with the overwhelm of a traumatic event or experience, the body does whatever it can in order to survive.

This is true whether the event is a car accident, sudden loss of a loved one, injury, illness, rape or sexual abuse. In basic terms, trauma can be defined as a psychological, emotional response to an event or an experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing. It is usually combined with feelings of helplessness, fear and inescapability.

When fight or flight responses are not possible (usually because our nervous system deems these responses unsafe, such as during a highway collision), the body resorts to freeze. Linked to that freeze state is dissociation. Generally speaking, dissociation represents the state of a person's perception when they're in the state of freeze.

Take a moment to ask yourself what your body and nervous system did in order to keep you alive back then. Did you fight? Did you flee or hide? Did you freeze? Whatever your answer - I want you to know now, that there is no right or wrong. No one approach is better than another. Yes, we may judge ourselves and wish that we had fought instead of freezing or acted in any other way than we did, but to our nervous system, the ONLY goal is survival. And, you *did* survive.

AT THE BEGINNING OF MY HEALING JOURNEY...

I felt like I was making progress. Using EFT Tapping on my own, I slowly began peeling away the layers of fear, sadness, grief, shame, self-loathing and rage about what had happened.

But every time I came into contact with how these emotions showed up in my body, I would completely blank-out and dissociate. It was like there was a huge disconnect between my feelings and my body awareness or 'felt sense'.

I was so frustrated, but in terms of trauma healing, my response makes perfect sense. You see, as a child, I dissociated in order to survive. Dissociation became my main survival strategy. With PTSD however, when the person is triggered by a past experience, they have little or no sense of safety and no awareness that the trauma is in the past.

This is one of the challenges with using any technique solely on your own with trauma. No matter how effective a technique like EFT Tapping is, when you dissociate, you're often unable to guide yourself through the tapping effectively. (This is why working with a professional is so helpful!)

I was still responding as if my abuse were happening today. I had no concept that the threat was over. Although I could grasp that logically, trauma does not involve our rational brain.

Our responses are firmly rooted in the mechanisms of our **reptilian and limbic brain systems**.

And so, when I was trying to process and heal the traumatic memories and experiences, my body and my nervous system were reacting as if the threat was still current today. I was trying to move forwards, to heal, but my body kept saying 'NO'. Healing did not feel safe. Remembering did not feel safe.

Take a moment to think about your experience and ask yourself how this plays out in your own life...

What strategies have you been using to cope with your trauma so far? Have you used food, medications or other substances to mask your pain or emotions?

Do you zone out or self-harm? Do you work too hard? Do you constantly clean or find other ways to feel in control? Do you sleep for hours or barely at all? Or maybe you run marathons or pursue other extreme sports?

Whatever tools or strategies you have developed to cope, there is a more balanced way that doesn't have to feel like an internal tug-of-war.

For me this tug-of-war was showing up in the disconnect between my desire for healing and the fear responses of my body...

I began to believe that my body was sabotaging my healing efforts - that my body was my worst enemy.

Constantly bombarding and blindsiding me with painful and overwhelming sensations. I had no idea what they meant or how to process them.

On one occasion, I went for a massage but as the woman reached my legs, I dissociated so completely that I felt like I was on the ceiling watching the massage happen to someone else down there on the table below. I was in a state of shocked, frozen terror.

I hated my body. I was angry with it and I felt like it was constantly letting me down and betraying me.

I was at war with my body and the more I resisted and ignored it, the louder my symptoms became. The more I pushed to heal, the more I dissociated and the more I experienced fragmented, disturbing and painful body sensations.

You see, I may have been processing some aspects of fear, shame, grief and rage, but I wasn't doing it in an embodied way.



**How have you been processing your trauma so far?
What has been working well and what has been keeping
you feeling frustrated and stuck?**

What changed for me was learning about **Somatic Experiencing, a body-based healing modality**.

Combining it with EFT Tapping, I finally learned how to make trauma recovery feel manageable and safe for me and subsequently for my clients.

I began to really listen to what my body sensations were trying to communicate with me, breaking the process down into tiny, manageable pieces. So that I could work with the emotions, memories and sensations from a grounded space, not in an over-whelming or re-traumatizing way.

So often before I had felt flooded by terror or shame so much so that I couldn't stay with it and would dissociate. I would get frustrated because I'd feel like I'd already been here before. I'd say to myself 'This is taking too long, haven't I cried enough? I thought I'd dealt with this issue already - how did I get back here?'

But what I've learned working both with my clients and with myself is to **slow down**.

Revisiting anger or sadness, or any other block to our healing, does not mean that our healing has slowed down or stopped. It doesn't mean we aren't progressing or that we're actually going backwards and getting worse.

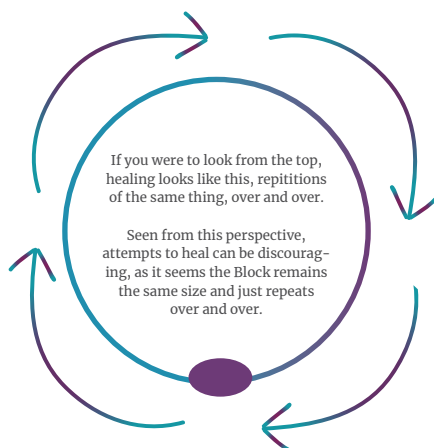
This is what many people think is happening. And yes, it can definitely feel like this. Especially when we're processing shame and futility. But I choose to look at healing now, not as a straight line, but as an ever-deepening spiral.

Check out the diagram below. On the left side is how it FEELS for many people when they're trying to heal from trauma, but on the right is what is actually happening...

THE HEALING SPIRAL (how healing deepens)

THE WAY MOST PEOPLE EXPERIENCE HEALING

(To most people, "healing" means the symptoms are gone. If the symptoms repeat, the Block has not healed)



THE WAY HEALING ACTUALLY WORKS

(In reality, "healing" means the symptoms repeat in smaller and smaller repetitions. Seen this way, healing is an ever deepening spiral)



If we look at our healing not as a 2 dimensional line or circle, but as a 3 dimensional spiral, we can view our healing journey from a rather different perspective. Now, each time we find ourselves coming into contact with an old challenge, block, belief or emotion, we do so from a new place, a new perspective.

We are not the same person as we were 1, 3 or even 5 years ago. Many of my clients beat themselves up and give themselves a really hard time saying 'shouldn't I be over this by now?!' 'I thought I'd already dealt with this'. But, no, this is not the same. You are not the same.

Each loop around the spiral is an opportunity to process our trauma at a new deeper level, from a new place of grounded consciousness and a higher perspective. Healing is not a straight line, it is a spiral.

4 – Safety Is Essential for Healing

A big milestone in the process of healing from sexual trauma is getting to the point where safety is restored (or possibly created for the first time!) – and you actually *feel* safe.

Safe to be around others. Safe to be in public. Safe to be at home. Safe to be around men. Safe in the bedroom. Safe to relax. Safe to sleep. Just plain old safe, anywhere and everywhere...

But that's easier said than done. When we go through sexual trauma, our sense of safety is stripped away in that moment (or all of those moments), making it difficult to then feel safe in later moments of life.

To understand why this happens and how we can restore safety again, let's first talk about how the natural body mechanisms around safety work.

But before we go into that, let me say this...

When we talk about healing, it is very important to recognize that there needs to be enough relative safety present in a person's life right now for this healing to happen. If a person who has experienced sexual assault, abuse or trauma is either still in a dangerous environment or their nervous system still perceives there to be danger, healing may not be possible at that time.

With that said, let's look at how the natural body mechanisms around safety work. It's important to understand this so you can understand what has happened to you and why your trauma feels stuck...

The body goes through various natural survival and defensive processes in response to traumatic stress. These processes happen in milliseconds...

First there is the **arrest response**. This happens for example if a door bangs. In response to the bang, the person will stop and notice their external environment. They will use their five senses to quickly evaluate whether the bang of the door poses a threat.

Then there is the **startle response**. This may happen simultaneously with the sound of the bang, but it has a higher level of activation than just the arrest response and it triggers the chemical changes in the body in preparation for action (fight/flight/freeze).



HAVE YOU EVER OBSERVED THIS RESPONSE IN ANOTHER PERSON, PET OR ANIMAL?

I live in Connecticut where we have many deer roaming around and I see this exact process take place every day.

Think of a deer eating foliage in the woods. It hears the sound of a twig snapping.

It pauses, tilting its head and angling its ears to listen carefully. Momentarily it seems to freeze. But, as soon as it feels there is no current or real threat, it returns to munching peacefully.

If the person evaluates that the door bang *does* pose a threat, their nervous system will go into **Defensive Orienting** in order to mobilize them to action. In this case, they may go into either a fight, a flight or a freeze/dissociation response.

If the threat does not materialize, the person reaches a state of **completion** of the threat response. **Their nervous system then returns to a state of relaxed awareness.**

This same completion response is what happens for people most of the time. However...

If a person has experienced traumatic overwhelm, where this process has been interrupted and not allowed to complete (eg. they were immobilized and unable to fight or flee) then their limbic system, and specifically their amygdala, can become over-sensitized. In essence, this is what causes trauma, an inability to complete this natural process.

When this happens, any activation or stimuli (triggers) will be interpreted as a threat.

For example, if a person was blindsided at an intersection ten years ago by a blue pickup truck, they may still go into a flight response today when they see a blue truck pull into the spot next to them at the grocery store. They may not even consciously know why they are having that response. This over-stimulation can lead to hyper-activation, such as a racing heart and panic with no seeming cause.

Take a moment to ask yourself about your own hyper-activation or triggers...

Does it happen at a particular time of day? Are you triggered by a specific sound? A certain fabric or smell perhaps? Something you see?

Left unresolved and un-healed as is the case with sexual trauma, an over-sensitized amygdala can lead to developing PTSD symptoms.

With PTSD, it feels like our past is still alive in our present life. It does not feel like the threat is over or that it will ever end. There is little or no sense of safety, but rather, a constant sense of dread and fear. There is no respite from the arrest and startle states (hyper-vigilance) and because of this, we can end up feeling drained and exhausted.

To understand this a little better, let's look at the two branches of our nervous system. The parasympathetic (relaxation response) and the sympathetic (stress response).

When we are in either fight or flight, our **Stress Response** is activated. Our digestive system slows and the adrenal system is activated. Our heart beats faster. Blood pressure increases. Our breath is shallower and more constricted. Basically we are preparing to fight or flee.

If those two choices are not possible, then our nervous system goes into a third option, known as the freeze (and dissociative) state. Although the body may be completely immobile or frozen in this state, there is a huge amount of survival energy underneath.

For people who have experienced sexual trauma and abuse, the stress response of the nervous system can become dominant and the person's access to the relaxation response of their nervous system is much less readily available.

The challenge with this is that it's in the relaxation response that rest, healing and proper digestive functions happen in the body. This is where breathing and heart-rate slows, blood pressure decreases, relaxation and cellular repair occurs.

As a result, people with a history of trauma can experience a wide array of health issues ranging from chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, IBS and SIBO as well as chronic pain, auto-immune disorders and other diseases because their body does not get the chance to spend enough time in a healing state.

So, with all this in mind, how then, do we begin to build the sense of relative safety needed for us to heal?

There are several parts to this process and it is a gradual process that takes time. If you choose to work with me as your Trauma Coach, we'll work gently with your body, your mind and your nervous system to build the positive sense of safety needed for true healing and recovery.

Here are some of the steps you'll go through:

a) REDISCOVERING YOUR SENSE OF SAFETY

We will gradually build up an awareness that you are in the here and now. The trauma that you experienced is now over. You survived it. You are safe now. This is easy to say, and yet, is something that can take a long time for our unconscious brain and our traumatized inner parts to grasp.

b) REBUILDING YOUR BOUNDARIES.

Back then, your trauma meant that your boundaries were violated. Perhaps you said no. Perhaps you fought back. Perhaps you could not fight because you were too little. Perhaps you froze. Whatever you did in order to survive – you succeeded. We honor that. You did survive. And, your boundaries were violated. We will work to re-build or maybe establish real boundaries for the very first time.

c) BRINGING YOUR PARASYMPATHETIC (RELAX RESPONSE) AND SYMPATHETIC (STRESS RESPONSE) NERVOUS SYSTEM BRANCHES BACK INTO BALANCE:

Once a sense of safety is established, we will work to find ways for you to relax your nervous system. Relaxation may have always felt dangerous or unsafe before. We will work to re-wire these neural pathways and beliefs by creating and supporting new experiences and new points of reference where relaxation is ok and may be even enjoyable. Together we will explore how you can spend more time in the parasympathetic states of rest and digest and less time being triggered and hyper-vigilant.

Safety is necessary for healing to happen, but it is not automatic. For people who may never have experienced safety before, it is a process of separating the past from the present and learning how to feel safe in the here and now.

Although you may not yet consciously understand why certain things trigger you at times, if you choose to work with me one-on-one ([make sure to set up a FREE healing consultation by going here!](#)), we'll work together to uncover those triggers, and to lower your levels of activation in response to them, bringing safety back into your body and mind.

Not only will this help you to combat the feeling that you are at the helpless mercy of your life and circumstances – being blind-sided at any time, but it will also allow you to begin the essential healing process of uncoupling past triggers from your present day life.

And in this way, you will gradually and safely restore your nervous system to a more balanced functioning.

5 – There is a Difference Between ‘Normal’ and Traumatic Memory

‘I feel crazy! Why can I remember every detail from start to finish of my son’s 1st birthday, but I can only remember a few fuzzy and disorganized details surrounding the night of my rape?’

This, and questions like it, are very common amongst people who have experienced trauma and abuse. But why is this? What makes memories of traumatic events so different from ‘normal’ memories?

In this section, we’ll explore how the brain works, how trauma affects memory, the differences between ‘normal’ and traumatic memories and why this is so important when trying to heal from sexual abuse.

We know that memories are how we recall the past. If we reminisce about when we graduated from college or when we got married, we are clear that we are remembering something that happened a certain number of days, months or years ago.

This kind of remembering is usually done voluntarily, such as when talking to friends or flipping through old photo albums. These ‘normal’ memories do not typically intrude randomly into our thoughts and do not leave us feeling like we’re back there in the moment of the event. Something quite different happens with traumatic memories however.

The memory of a traumatic event, whether it be a car accident, sexual assault or mugging, does not rest easily in the past. For the trauma survivor, it is as if the traumatic event plays out over and over and over again without end.

The traumatic memory intrudes into a person’s thoughts and disrupts their daily life.

For example, a woman who was attacked many years ago may find that walking alone in any area, no matter how safe, still poses a huge threat. She will likely experience the same pounding heart and fear that she did on the day she was attacked. But why is this?

In order to understand the differences between ‘normal’ memories and traumatic memories, we need to look at:

HOW THE BRAIN FUNCTIONS...

Although it would take far more space than I have here for a full discussion of the brain, we can look at the parts of the brain most relevant to understanding trauma; namely the **prefrontal cortex** (the thinking or rational center of the brain) and the **limbic system** (the emotional and survival center of the brain).

THE PREFRONTAL CORTEX

In its simplest terms, the **Prefrontal Cortex** is the center of conscious thought and awareness. It maintains our attention on both our external environment (what we see, hear, smell etc) and our internal environment (our emotions, thoughts, body sensations).

Thinking, such as recalling a grocery list or family recipe along with recall of dates, times and facts all happen in the prefrontal cortex.

THE LIMBIC SYSTEM

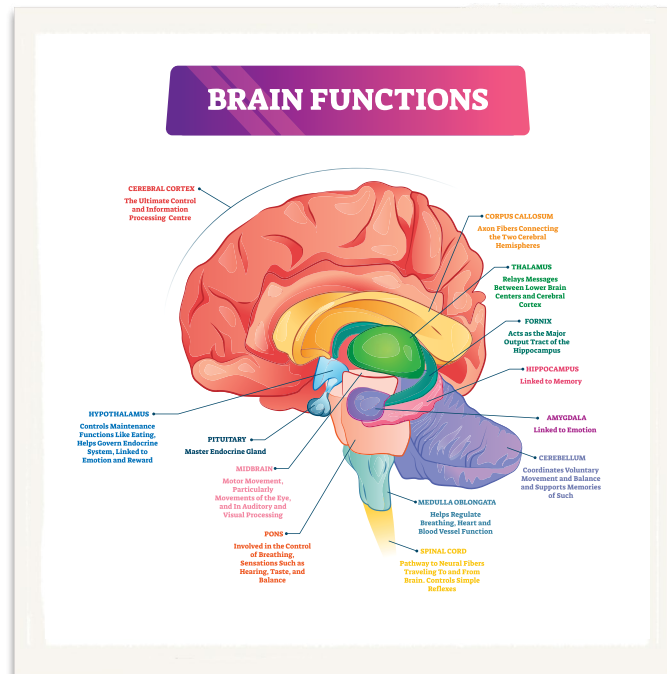
The Limbic System is responsible for our survival. It keeps us safe from danger by assessing the sensory input coming to us from both our internal and our external environments and then setting in motion the necessary defensive responses of fight, flight and freeze.

The **amygdala** is the part of the Limbic System that essentially interprets this sensory data for threat and then instructs the body to respond accordingly.

The **hippocampus** is the part of the Limbic System that is responsible for recording the time frame and sequencing of events. It is how, in telling the story of a past event, we are able to do so with a linear fashion, with a beginning, middle and most importantly, an end.

For example, take a moment to think back on an experience in the last week where you ran an errand. Perhaps you were mailing a parcel at the post office. As you think back, you can easily recall that it was roughly 9:30am on a Tuesday.

You know this because you saw the school buses returning to the depot as you drove by. You remember the sappy music that was playing as you stood in line and your mild irritation that you couldn't get your blue pen to work as you wrote out the return address card. You remember



the pleasantries you exchanged with the cashier and that the air smelled warm with rain as you left the post office a little after 10am.

As you think back on your own example, notice the sequencing of the event you chose to recall. The details you recalled about the errand you ran; the sequencing of how your errand began, how long it took and how and when it ended are all down to your hippocampus doing its job properly.

The challenge with the hippocampus, however, is that it is very vulnerable to high levels of stress hormones and so, when adrenaline and other stress hormones do reach a threshold level, especially during a traumatic event, the hippocampus will stop functioning and go offline. Subsequently, the time sequencing of that event will not be recorded accurately in the brain if in fact it is recorded at all.

But what does this mean for people who have experienced trauma or abuse? Essentially, it means that the memory of traumatic events will be devoid of structure; with no beginning, no middle and crucially, no end.

Because of this, the amygdala will go on firing as if the threat is still ongoing even years later.

The hippocampus will not be able to signal an end to the traumatic event and so the prefrontal cortex in turn, will not be able to tell the amygdala to turn off the threat response. Consequently, for myself and for so many of my clients with PTSD symptoms, the result can be a continually firing amygdala, hyper-vigilance and a feeling that the trauma is being re-lived or re-played continually, without hope or end.

So, where does this leave us? What hope is there for survivors of sexual abuse and trauma?

The problem AND the resolution seem to both lie with the hippocampus.

When we think about the **crucial difference** then between 'normal' memory and traumatic memory we have seen that it is in the hippocampus' inability to **mark or signify the ending of an event**.

Without an end, we set up the conditions for the traumatic event of the past to still loop continuously and live on as if it is still happening in the present day.

That's why one-on-one work with a Trauma Coach – somebody who can guide you through the safe completion and resolution of the threat response cycle; restoring safety and vitality to your brain and body is so important.

And that's where techniques such as EFT Tapping and Somatic Experiencing are so crucial...

I wish I could say that you could just read this guide, or take an online course, and be healed from sexual trauma, but it's simply not that easy. Unlike other challenges that we can work through on our own in order to grow and improve in our lives, trauma-healing poses an entirely different challenge – namely because of the prevalence of PTSD and C-PTSD symptoms that trauma survivors experience. When we are triggered with PTSD and we freeze or dissociate, our ability to use our prefrontal cortex, to make new decisions and rewire our brain effectively, is extremely limited, and in fact almost non-existent.

It took me some time to realize that I could not do this healing work exclusively on my own. As a student of personal development, reading books and attending events since my early twenties, I thought I could push my way through it, but I was wrong.

That only led to extreme frustration as I constantly felt at the mercy of my past experiences, only ever able to make seemingly small improvements, but always still struggling with terror, dread, panic and shame as well as body triggers, and the feeling of a lack of safety that I couldn't control.

The biggest place where my trauma impacted me was in my relationship with my husband, Alex. Alex is very supportive and understanding about the nature of my trauma and the inherent triggers.

But for years we struggled with intimacy because I was so frequently triggered by things that I was very often consciously unaware of. Be it a gesture, a sound or a body position during sex. I constantly felt unsafe, even though logically I knew that it was my husband and that I was safe with him.

I've made tremendous progress with my triggers and my PTSD symptoms, in large part because of the one-on-one work I've done with my own trauma coaches, using both EFT Tapping and Somatic Experiencing.

When it comes to intimacy today, although we do still have some challenges along the way, we are light years away from where we were years ago (just ask Alex!) :).

It still takes conscious effort to remember that I am in the here and now and that I am not back then as a traumatized and terrified little girl. But it does get easier as time goes by, especially as I discover and release different somatic triggers and create more safety in my body.

It is not always easy to un-enmesh myself from the feelings, emotions and sensations from back then, but it is an essential part of the process of healing and having a loving and whole-hearted relationship.

There are times when simply a sound or a touch can send me into a panic attack or see me balled-up in the fetal position. But I have not and will not quit on myself. I know I deserve more. I deserve to love and be loved and I know YOU deserve that too.

How Would Your Life Be Different Without the Effects of Your Trauma?

When you think about your life, what areas have been most affected by your trauma? Have your relationships been affected? Do you struggle with intimacy? How about your confidence in yourself, at work, or in groups? How safe do you feel on a daily basis? When do you not feel safe?

What do you want to be different now and going forwards? How would your life be different if the trauma didn't still affect you today? What do you need and want to overcome so that you can live the life you truly deserve today?

Now imagine what your life would be like if these events hadn't happened? How would you act differently? How would you feel differently?

While we can't change the events of the past, we absolutely can change the way it impacts us and affects our life today.

Allow Me to Guide You in Your Healing Journey As Your Trauma Coach. Setting Up a Healing Consultation Is Free, Easy and Comes With Zero Pressure or Commitment...

Hopefully by now you've gotten to see that I don't just coach and educate others on trauma-healing, but rather, it's something that I live every day.

So, whether you experienced a single traumatic event such as a rape or whether you experienced years and years of sexual abuse, I'm here to help you reclaim your safety, your freedom, and your ability to live your life to the fullest.

In working with me as your coach, our goal will be to gently and safely bring your hippocampus back online.



We'll use a combination of EFT Tapping and Somatic Experiencing (SE) to send calming signals to the amygdala to let it know it's safe. When we restore this sense of safety, the prefrontal cortex will be able to let the amygdala know that it's safe to halt its threat response, allowing your nervous system to relax and find balance.

We'll use a somatic, body-centered approach because in the absence of the proper functioning of the hippocampus, trauma gets stored in our body, our joints and our cells as well as in our energy systems. When we do spend enough time processing our implicit or procedural memories, we find that organically and naturally a more conscious and cognitive understanding can emerge. Unfortunately, a head-up cognitive approach (traditional therapy) is simply not effective with trauma.

When we can spend enough time allowing the body to sense in to and feel the emotions that we did not get to feel back then (perhaps it would not have been safe to feel or it would have been too overwhelming to our nervous system), as well as to complete the impulses and actions (like fighting or fleeing) that were thwarted at the time of our trauma, we can truly resolve, heal and allow ourselves to return to a balanced state where the nervous system functions in an optimal way.

In other words, you will no longer be activated or triggered by things that you used to find traumatic. You will instead, be able to live more fully and joyfully in the present moment.

Gradually and with time and consistency, your body and nervous system will recognize that the threat is over; there is no further need for hyper-vigilance, fight, flight or freeze. And in place of these, together we can create space for the safe resolution and healing of trauma.

Whether it be at the time of the trauma, or even many years later, there is always hope for healing. You deserve to have more safety, more joy, more choice in the life you live and I am excited to be your guide along the way.

Now that you've read this guide, it's time to take the next step on your healing journey.

Click on the button below or go to <https://www.karenortner.com/work-with-me/> to set up a free Trauma Healing Consultation today:

GET STARTED ►

