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Foreword

A breakthrough moment in psychotherapy can be an insight or a shift toward adaptive resolution of a disturbing memory; or it can occur in an early therapy session, or even prior to the first session, when the client makes the brave decision to pick up the phone and make an initial appointment. This book is written for individuals who are at the initial point of turning the corner on their long-standing problems and have questions: “I know generally what psychotherapy is, but what would it be for me, and how could it really help me?” “There are so many different kinds of therapy—which method would be the best fit for me?” “What would an actual therapy session be like for me, with the difficulties I have?” This book contains concise, accurate, and accessible answers to these types of questions.

The theme throughout the chapters is one of *normalizing* the problems of people with difficult and extensive trauma histories—those individuals who might be described within the categories of complex PTSD and/or developmental trauma disorder. Dr. Schwartz makes it clear that complex PTSD is a normal response or adaptation to non-normal life conditions that may be in a person’s history. This in itself is a very useful perspective, especially for those clients who have been struggling with emotional problems for a long time, and, as a result, have much reduced self-esteem. The comprehensive and compassionate descriptions of the many different manifestations of complex PTSD are likely to be helpful for those clients who have feared, erroneously, that they are too unusual or “weird” to be helped.

Throughout each of the chapters, the reader is invited to respond in writing with information from their own life experience. This volume then becomes more than just a book off the shelf, but instead a more real and interactive experience.

The chapters provide comprehensive coverage of a range of issues related to the treatment of complex PTSD: the importance of attachment patterns (as a sometimes hidden element of an adult's emotional problem); an overview of different models of treatment, with enough information about each method so the reader can make an informed choice regarding which approach might be the best fit; and potential obstacles to successful treatment—obstacles that can be identified in advance so that an appropriate treatment plan can be constructed. With these issues in mind, the therapist and client will be better able to form a roadmap for therapy, a contract listing therapy goals, and the likely best path to reaching each of those goals. This book is a valuable resource for all those affected by complex PTSD, allowing them to be informed and active as partners in the therapeutic healing process.

JIM KNIPE, PHD

Introduction

It takes tremendous courage to confront childhood trauma. Like searching in the dark for an unknown source of pain, the process of healing can feel daunting, if not terrifying. This book will help you illuminate that darkness and enter a new world of personal freedom.

Childhood traumas can range from having faced extreme violence and neglect to having confronted feelings of not belonging, being unwanted, or being chronically misunderstood. You may have grown up in an environment where your curiosity and enthusiasm were constantly devalued. Perhaps you were brought up in a family where your parents had unresolved traumas of their own, which impaired their ability to attend to your emotional needs. Or, you may have faced vicious sexual or physical attacks. In all such situations, you learn to compensate by developing defenses around your most vulnerable parts. Importantly, we cannot compare one person's loss or pain to another's—every person's experience is different and leaves different wounds.

Unresolved childhood trauma has significant consequences on mental and emotional health. You might alternate between feeling cut off and feeling flooded with emotions such as fear, anger, or despair. Perhaps you suffer from anxiety or depression. Maybe you resort to disconnection or dissociation to get through the day. Relationships are often compromised. Your physical health may also be impacted by illness or chronic pain. If you find yourself struggling with any of these symptoms, this book is for you.

Healing childhood trauma involves a balance: attending to the wounds of the past while living in the present. Simply attending to the demands of daily living can feel insurmountable at times. Going to the store to buy groceries, handling

stress at work, raising children, or relating to your spouse can feel overwhelming when you are flooded with anxiety or shut down in shame. Having strategies to remain mindful and feel grounded is essential. These tools will allow you to turn toward your pain without creating additional distress.

As a therapist, I have spent years helping those with histories of childhood trauma find their way to wholeness. I know the territory of the healing path, having walked it myself. This book provides a map to the terrain, along with a knowledgeable and compassionate guide.

Within this book you will learn all about complex PTSD and gain valuable insight into the types of symptoms associated with unresolved childhood trauma. My goal is to empower you with a thorough understanding of the science and

Within the ground of another—in this case, a compassionate therapist—you embrace experiences of confusion, discomfort, anger, grief, shame, and pain.

psychology of trauma so you can make informed choices about therapy and partner with your health care providers. You will be guided to develop positive strategies to replace destructive behaviors. Mindfulness-based experiential practices will help you develop both self-acceptance and a sense of safety—which will prepare you to explore your traumatic past. Overall, this book offers a strength-based perspective to integrate positive beliefs and behaviors.

Focusing on self-care—including yoga, journaling, and other valuable practices—can enable you to create routines that facilitate lifelong wellness.

This book is not a substitute for therapy. Recovery from developmental trauma requires that you have a reparative experience *in a relationship*. Within the ground of another—in this case, a compassionate therapist—you embrace experiences of confusion, discomfort, anger, grief, shame, and pain. A compassionate therapist offers a container of sorts for the feelings and memories that you might be unable to handle alone. And together, you'll build trust, gain perspective, and find healing tools that work best for you. Still, the words in this book will guide

you to tap into the healing power that exists inside of you. Using this book alongside psychotherapy can help educate and deepen understanding to reduce the time and cost of treatment.

I invite you to think about your healing journey as a deeply rewarding, lifelong process of self-discovery that you deserve. Undoubtedly, there will be pain and suffering. Yet, self-acknowledgment also offers keys to empowerment and personal freedom. Throughout these pages you will find a strength-based, nonstigmatizing approach to healing. You are not broken, in need of fixing. Rather, you are deeply hurt, in need of care. With sufficient support, you will be able to release your defensive self-protection to reveal your innate worth, wisdom, and creativity—your greatness. I invite you to discover and be surprised by your resilience. You have a history that has endowed you with a unique perspective on what it means to be alive. Only you can decide what to do with your life now, and you're on the right track. You're here.



CHAPTER ONE

Understanding Trauma

If you were neglected or abused as a child, your primary orientation to the world is likely to be one of threat, fear, and survival. It's only natural that a childhood experience with untrustworthy parents or caregivers would leave you untrusting or confused about what constitutes a loving relationship. Fear and lack of safety might compel you to continuously scan your environment for potential threats. You may have relied upon coping strategies to survive, such as dissociation, a protective mechanism that disconnects you from threatening experiences. If you can relate to these qualities, you may also identify with related issues such as self-criticism, emotional suffering, and relationship difficulties. If this describes you, it is not your fault and you have not failed. You have a form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Traumatic experiences are, by their very definition, frightening and overwhelming. PTSD is often associated with events such as car accidents, natural disasters, or acts of violence. It is common after experiences like these to feel flooded with powerful emotions such as fear or sadness, and to begin avoiding situations that remind you of the trauma. PTSD refers to the presence of these symptoms well after the event is over. However, there is another kind of post-traumatic stress called complex PTSD (C-PTSD), which occurs as a result of long-term exposure to traumatic stress, rather than in response to a single incident. C-PTSD typically arises as a result of ongoing stress or repeated traumatic events that occur during childhood and is sometimes referred to as developmental trauma disorder (DTD).

Growing up afraid has ramifications on cognitive, emotional, and physical development that can persist into adulthood—until you have the necessary sup-

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port to heal your wounds. C-PTSD is not a character weakness; it is a learned stress disorder. The good news is this: You *can* reclaim your life from the costs of childhood trauma. When you are empowered with knowledge and awareness, you can deepen your self-acceptance and reduce the difficult emotions that often accompany developmental trauma. In this chapter and throughout this book, you will develop a greater understanding of complex PTSD

and discover ways to mitigate its effects to help you heal. The goals of this workbook are to encourage a compassionate understanding of your symptoms and to provide you with action steps that will help you recover from developmental trauma.

Learning Self-Care

By the time I met Diane, her suffering had become unbearable. She reported experiencing debilitating anxiety mixed with feelings of hopelessness and despair. She was married, but her relationship was suffering under the weight of her symptoms. In the past year, she had gained weight, developed migraines, and struggled with insomnia.

Diane was very skilled at avoiding dealing with her traumatic past. To survive, she had learned to bury her painful feelings and memories, preferring not to talk about her childhood. It simply hurt too much. She kept a tight lid on her past, but now her migraines and insomnia made her feel as though she were coming apart at the seams. Diane had lost a sense of choice or control over her emotional life.

I learned that Diane had a history of exposure to domestic violence during her childhood. Her father was an alcoholic and her mother was never really involved in her life, other than to tell her what she was doing wrong. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she said, "They never should have had children; I should have never been born."

If you can relate to Diane's story in any way, take comfort in this: C-PTSD is the result of learned ineffective beliefs and behaviors that can be replaced by a positive mind-set and health-promoting behaviors. With the same tools that you'll find in this book, Diane was able to integrate resources such as mindfulness and relaxation techniques into her life to help her feel more grounded and safe. She explored her history and developed a greater tolerance for facing her painful emotions. Writing about her past allowed her to feel in control of her life now. As a result of her consistent commitment to self-care, she strengthened her self-acceptance and compassion.

After several weeks of practicing the action steps that you'll learn in this book, Diane had an epiphany: *"My parents neglected me, and now I neglect myself by not taking care of my body as an adult. They could not love me the way that I needed, but I can become good at loving myself!"*

EMBRACING CHANGE

It is human nature to seek safety and stability. You might say, “This is who I am, and this is who I will always be.” Familiar, repeated routines simplify life and conserve energy. They can help manage stress, because there is comfort in what is known. New situations require more awareness of our surroundings. Some routines may temporarily reduce stress, but can lead to unwanted consequences and unhealthy habits such as obesity, procrastination, self-sabotage, or addictions.

In order to embrace any change, we need to take specific action to challenge behaviors and beliefs that no longer serve us. Research suggests that creating any desired change in life requires the repeated practice of new health-promoting behaviors until they become new habits. Getting regular exercise, eating a healthy diet, and developing positive social connections are among the best things we can do for ourselves to strengthen our resilience. No matter what you have gone through, you have the ability to heal your body and mind.

The tricky part is this: Once you allow yourself to feel your pain—to face it head-on—you can free yourself from it. When you recognize that limiting beliefs are running your life, you can then work to take charge of your mind and begin reclaiming your right to a positive outlook on life.

A Heavy Burden

Fred has been living with anxiety for much of his life. Now an adult, he has two children who depend on him and a job that he can't afford to lose. After his chest pains started last year, he told his doctor about his ongoing panic attacks and insomnia. He was prescribed anti-anxiety medications, which kept him afloat but left him feeling flat and depressed. Thankfully, his doctor also suggested that he seek psychotherapy. As we explored his past, he spoke of growing up in a chaotic and unpredictable childhood home. He said that after his parent's divorce, his mother was never the same. Slowly, we unpacked the heavy burden of insecurity that Fred has been carrying all this time.