



After Trauma: Recover By Coping, Refocusing, Renewing

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Since the trauma, you may be feeling depressed. Do you feel that you aren't making much progress?

Good nutrition, daily exercise, supportive friends, the right medication and counseling with a professional can all help. However, healing comes faster when you also have a self-help program.

No counselor, regardless of her professional skills, can magically pull you out of a depression. You will need to manage your thoughts and feelings in a positive way to get on the road to healing.

One important fact to remember is this: *You have to want to get well.* If this sounds like a lot of work, don't despair. It's easier to help yourself if you understand how much control you really do have.

Be patient and go step-by-step

Picture your emotional well-being as a "bank account." Before the trauma, your emotional bank account might have been depleted already. Negative events then added pressure to the problems you already faced.

Your goal now must be to "deposit" good feelings back into your life. When you first try this, you might not feel much better. That's because your reserves are so low. But keep "working the plan" described below. You will start to feel your emotional bank account rising.

Think of recovering successfully as moving through 3 stages of progress: coping, refocus and renewal. Try to move from one stage to the other by taking small steps every day.

Your progress may sometimes be shaky, especially in the beginning. Don't get down on yourself if the smallest things—for example, fixing lunch or driving your child to school—are overwhelming. Just keep focusing on inching forward. Do what's possible to accomplish each day and never get down on yourself if you can't do more.

Develop a plan of coping

This means that you will practice small, self-care rituals. These rituals will become small “anchors” that give stability to your day. Choose activities that steer your mind to healthy feelings.

For example, listen to tapes of music you love. Studies show that music can enhance mental wellness significantly. It “pulls out” those good feelings you once experienced along with that music. Other small rituals include visiting a coffee shop you enjoy, relaxing on your porch or terrace with a magazine or calling a friend for 20 minutes every evening to ask for emotional support.

In the coping stage, be patient. *Some days will not go well.* Accept this. But stay with your self-nurturing rituals until you can move to the next stage.

Develop a plan of refocus

When a large disaster or personal trauma has affected your life, eventually move away from thinking about it so much. You will need to *redirect your energies* to something else.

This is the hardest stage of recovery because it requires good old-fashioned willpower. You have to turn your full attention to staying busy. This stage of recovery requires that you close the mental door to painful events—as effectively as you possibly can.

You may wish to take a class, fix up your apartment, join a local songwriter’s group or start fixing up your house. In taking these steps, you will be tempted to keep looking over your shoulder to reflect on negative events, but stick with focusing on your new goals.

Don’t allow yourself to skip the class you signed up for. Don’t permit yourself to lie in bed and forget painting the kitchen. *Make yourself do these things.*

Spend the energy that you’re using on worry and anxiety on accomplishments. Productive actions will bring on new, healthy thoughts and feelings.

Develop a plan of renewal

This means that you will think about making important changes to steer your life in a healthy, new direction. In order to do this, you must set a few productive, long-term goals that require a commitment of some type.

In the renewal stage, you will strive to make your life as rich and meaningful as possible—despite what has happened to you in the past.

For example, you might move to a new neighborhood, supervise an ongoing exercise program at

work, further your education, found a charity or scholarship program or offer to assist with a Scout troop.

Many people get stuck on “just coping” or just staying busy. They never make it to the “renewal” stage of recovery. This stage is important because doing things to move your life in a positive direction will boost your self-esteem.

You might not feel like trying anything new right now. It might be some time before you do. However, eventually you will find your grounding. You will want to do productive things again.

Challenge yourself

When you are focused on a “plan of renewal” that truly appeals to you, it’s easier to cope with stress, setbacks and days that don’t go well. That’s because *it takes less energy to live a life full of exciting goals*. Have you ever noticed that it’s difficult to be “psyched up” about average goals?

Don’t make goals that intensely overwhelm you. After all, you don’t want to set yourself up for failure. However, do make your goals exciting enough to make you want to get up and get going every morning.

Here’s a word of caution, however: Always keep your small, comforting daily rituals in place. Keep doing those things you practiced in your “plan of coping” stage.

Depositing healthy feelings into your bank account *every day* is important. You can begin to feel depressed again, if all you do is spend your time reaching goals. Just ask any busy executive who doesn’t have time to “stop and smell the roses.”

It’s important to feel good for no particular reason at all—just enjoying a cup of coffee on the terrace or relaxing with a friend. The small things keep your emotional bank account in balance.

Remember, if you continue to have trouble coping, talk to a professional. Sometimes it is not possible to get through depression on your own.

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