

SURVIVING TRAUMA - A JOURNEY

CAMROSE POLICE SERVICE

TRAUMA AND CRIME SUPPORT SERVICES

780-672-4570

Experiencing Trauma

- ✚ A friend, family member, colleague, or you are involved in a car accident
- ✚ Your house burns down, is broken into, or vandalized
- ✚ You escaped a disaster by luck
- ✚ You witnessed a crime, a disaster, a fatal accident
- ✚ You feared someone you knew was involved, even as it turned out they were not
- ✚ Someone you know is murdered, dies by suicide, accident, or natural disaster

Trauma is an unexpected sudden negative event that affects you physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. The suddenness of the event throws your coping mechanisms out the window; unsets your equilibrium and you can no longer cope. In order to survive the trauma, you have to establish a new normal and put trauma, not out of mind, but to the back of your mind. This is hard to accomplish without support and hard work. It is not a short-term process for most people and not a straight line from here to there.

Healing from Trauma

You may find a lot of opinions about how to handle your trauma. The internet and library are full of answers. But allow yourself to heal at your pace and find a way that helps you build your own “new normal.” This can take many forms:

Physically: Exercise, eat well, get enough sleep, massage, yoga

Emotionally: Talk to someone supportive and non-judgmental. Express your emotions. Do not compare yourself to everyone else. Your emotions will be yours and should be accepted by you and others.

Psychologically: You may struggle with ongoing symptoms with your mental health after a trauma. Again, this is not a linear process but a journey of unknown duration. Seek help if you can't function in your day to day world due to ongoing reactions/effects of the trauma; if intrusive thoughts remove all enjoyment and functionality out of your life; you are not sleeping or eating; or you have a lot of fear, shame, or guilt; or your relationships are suffering.

Intellectually: Tell the story as a story of survival in paint, words, fabric. Be creative; learn something new; engage with others.

Spiritually: Explore your spiritual side, redefine your views of life, death, the world. Give yourself permission to be human and not alone in the universe,

“Surviving is necessary, but thriving is elegant”. Maya Angelou

The Journey

This journey you are going to embark on is not a straight, well paved highway. It is a road with many twists, turns, choices, and U-turns. For every person that enters onto this journey, the road will be different in shape and length. No two people will have the same journey, so it is important not to compare your journey with everyone else's journey.



Along the journey, you will pass guideposts that are common to everyone.

Sometimes you will stop at the guidepost and complete the task and move on. Sometimes you will avoid the guidepost and sometimes you will return to the guidepost. Give yourself permission to map out your own journey.

The journey is not a race. You are not going to end your journey in the same time frame as everyone else. Your speed of dealing with what has happened to you depends on many factors including past traumas and how you dealt with them. You also process information differently than other people which can make your journey longer or shorter.

Lastly, your journey should not be a parking lot. In order to return to life, you have to move. Sometimes forward, sometimes backwards. But sitting still is not a health option. Even deciding to pack this trauma away in the trunk is a decision in survival.

We always start at Home

You had a life before trauma. You may have had trauma in your past or may not have. You may have had smaller traumas in your past. Or you could have had very significant trauma. These traumas may or not be resolved. Or may have been packed into your mental suitcase and put in the attic.



The Moment of Trauma

Witnessing or experiencing a traumatic event turns something on in your brain. A large number of chemicals are dumped into your system to help your mind and body deal with a threat. Your first reaction will be to fight, flee, flop, or freeze--often not our conscious choice. These instinctive ways of behaving were laid down during evolution to react to events in our environment and survive. Fight is physically facing the threat and beating it off; flight happens when your brain identifies an escape route and runs; flop is doing whatever it takes to survive (sometimes called Stockholm Syndrome). Freeze is the most common response to danger; however, this response is often seen as cowardice or "not doing anything." Basically, our mind and body "freeze" and hope the threat goes away or is not as bad as you thought. As we respond to the threat, your brain is also protecting itself by blocking the creation of memories and trying to block out the emotional affects of the event. Because of this you may feel numb or asleep during the event.

You Hit the Ditch

The event is behind you but you stop moving forward. Even though everyone around you is saying "get over it" you don't feel you can let go. The world and people no longer feel safe. Home is no longer your comfortable base and you struggle to process what happened. You start to grieve what you lost.

The changes that occurred in your brain and body can then lead to a traumatic response. You may go into a state of denial and shock whereby your brain tries to convince you the trauma did not happen or was not as bad as you thought. You change your worldview or your sense of self and others. You may feel you failed yourselves or others.

At first, you may ruminate on the events and your reactions. You may find yourself reliving the event; having strong emotional reactions to memories or triggers; or struggling to remember the details. You are asking why

this happened and why you did this or that. Don't try to talk yourself out of these reactions. Accept them and give yourself the time you need for them to fade and for you to come to a turning point where you can see how your life is changed and start to grieve the loss of your old life.

Common Reactions While Sitting in the Ditch

Anger with yourself and others over big and little things

Not taking care of yourself-not eating, not bathing, not sleeping, sitting on couch eating junk food all day

Feeling hypervigilant, anxious, unsafe up to having panic attacks, being unable to leave your home, isolating yourself from others

Feeling guilt or shame over what happened

Feeling unworthy to have survived

Loss of connection to yourself and others

Emotional extremes -crying, laughing, anger, fear, anxiety

Don't dismiss your reactions or disregard them. Acknowledging how you feel about the trauma is a first step to moving beyond the trauma. Find someone safe to talk to, someone who is non-judgmental and will accept you where you are on this journey. This can be a person already in your life or a professional.

Remember at this point logic might not work for you. Your brain does not use logic at times of trauma. It goes into a survival mode designed only to keep itself and the body alive.

You're on a Different Road

Trauma moves us onto a new road and we may grieve the old road. You may come to see limitations to your expectations in life as you can no longer meet our goals (you are injured and can no longer run races); your normal life path is gone (you lose your children or spouse, or cannot work); or you become aware of your own mortality (the event showed you how life can end quickly). The world is a different place, unsafe, dark, lonely. You know it is time to get back on the road but it is hard to push out of the ditch you have found yourself in. You no longer feel you have the tools you need to start a new journey. You start to grieve your losses.

Common reactions to this New Path

Anger over the loss of people, places, things, goals

Anxiety over facing the new world

Sadness over the losses

Fear of the future, of death, of failure

Irritability over little things as you cannot handle dealing with life

Self-medication with alcohol and drugs to numb the new world

Crying spells, dissociation, headaches, fatigue, disillusionment

Taking the Wheel Again

At this point in your journey you start to make plans to hit the road again. You may get help to out of the ditch or you may move on your own. You start to build skills to move on down the road. Some of your new plans may have a negative effect and slow down your progress (isolation, self-medication, refusing help). Others will give you the ability to take small steps forward that build to larger strides. You listen to yourself and give yourself permission to be human. You accept that the journey is hard and has many twists and turns. Focus on what you can control. You begin to build a toolbox that will help you deal with this trauma and future traumas (resiliency).

Things to put in your toolbox

Others to lean on - Family, friends, professional helpers

Your physical well-being- eat healthy, sleep, exercise

Your emotional health – express your emotions somewhere safe and accept them as your own. Tell your story and acknowledge your survival as a positive.

Your unique experience -Think about what happened and your reaction. Journal, talk, draw, whatever you desire. Own what happened as part of your life. Remember, your experience of the trauma is unique and cannot be compared to others experiences.

Your spiritual self. Try to find meaning in what happened and who you are now. This does not have to be religious.

Your intellectual self. Trauma is not your fault. War is not your fault. Weather is not your fault. Accidents and crime happen and are not your fault (even if legally you are at fault, you did not mean to let it happen). Now is the time to start to apply logic to the event.

The Long Road Ahead

You have travelled a long way and it seems to our life is getting easier again. You have pulled yourself forward step by step and ready to face your new reality.

Signs you have turned the corner

Your emotions have evened out. Triggers which use to send you careening out of control now are acknowledged but can be filed away for later. You are not crying as a song plays or jumping out of your skin at hearing a loud sound. Your anxiety and anger are lessening. Mole hills are no longer mountains.

You are responding to the world, not reacting to it. You can now take information in, consider it without the knee jerk reaction of fight, flee, flop or freeze. Your decisions are surer and informed.

You are feeling again. Emotions are good or bad but they are there. The door to the world is starting to open again. You start to feel safe and able to let stuff go.

You are not feeling overwhelmed and fragile with everyday events and stresses. You can handle situations again. You can answer the door, watch the news, or go jogging. You start to trust yourself again in the world.

You feel you should still feel bad about what happened but don't feel ...or don't feel as bad. You don't forget the old you but it is no longer the primary focus of your thoughts.

You experience less negative self-talk. You accept you are human and you accept you've survived.

You can be honest with yourself and others about the losses you have experienced without your world crashing down. You stop blaming yourself and realize that what you did, saw, experienced that day was not your fault. Take responsibility for what is your own part, if needed, but you accept you did what you could.

You can build or re-establish relationships. Trauma can leave us feeling abandoned and we seek safety. We may become clingy or try to force new relationships to fill holes. If we are escaping trauma, we may try to rebuild similar relationship and try to relive the trauma with a better outcome. As we start to feel safe and loved again, we look for healthy relationships and leave behind old habits.

You start enjoying activities and events you enjoyed before the trauma. If you have experienced the loss of a loved one or a loss of function you begin to try to adapt so that you can enjoy your life again. You have fun, you socialize, you go out into the world.

Your energy increases. You feel like you can do your everyday tasks. Your health improves. You sleep improves, you have fewer headaches, you eat better, and you can move without pain (emotional and physical).

You come to appreciate what the experience taught you. You have developed coping skills and learned you can survive.

When to call the Road Side Assistance

Sometimes during a journey, you come to a stop and cannot move any further. You may have to call on some extra help. You may have to decide if this is the point where support is needed.

- ✚ Have intrusive thoughts and reactions that are stopping you from going through your day to day life tasks or stopping you from engaging in the normal relationships in your life. You find that life is just so overwhelming, you withdraw from all of it.
- ✚ If the event does not fade and the feelings present at the time of the traumatic event do not subside at all. The event is as fresh today as when it happened. Your emotions around these thoughts and triggers are intense and you feel like you have little control over them.
- ✚ You experience a total loss of interest in any meaningful or enjoyable activity.
- ✚ You start to isolate from everyone and everything.
- ✚ You are not eating, sleeping, working, exercising. Everything has become an overwhelming effort.
- ✚ You are thinking of harming yourself or someone else. This can take the form of self-punishment (I'm not good enough to ...) or taking risks with your safety (walking in traffic) or self-harm (cutting yourself).

Now is the time to call for help.

Resources

If you need immediate help call 911

Camrose Police Services 780-672-4444

CPS Trauma and Crime Support Services 780-672-4570

Primary Care Network 780-608-4927

AHS Mental Health and Addictions 780-672-1241

Hospice Society of Camrose 780-608-0636

Canadian Mental Health 780-672-2570

Helplines

CMHA Suicide Prevention Line 1-800-232-7288

Health Link 811

Mental Health Helpline 1-877-303-2642

Suicide Crisis Help Line 988 (call or text)

Indigenous Hope for Wellness Helpline 1-855-242-3310