

The Three Stages of Trauma Recovery

Adapted from Herman, 1992

If traumatic memory is worked with directly, it can contribute to re-living the trauma and further destabilization. Instead, the focus of recovery is on helping you create safety and stability, develop internal and external resources, transform your relationship to past trauma, promote mind-body-emotion regulation and integration, and create the conditions for optimal personal and relational health and well-being.

There are three stages of trauma recovery:

Stage 1: Safety and Stabilization: Overcoming Dysregulation

As a first step, you must first learn to comprehend the effects of trauma: to recognize common symptoms and to understand the meaning of overwhelming body sensations, intrusive emotions, and distorted cognitive schemas. The achievement of safety and stability rests on the following tasks:

- Establishing bodily safety: e.g. abstinence from self-injury.
- Establishment of a safe environment: e.g., a secure living situation, non-abusive relationships, a job and/or regular income, adequate supports.
- Establishment of emotional stability: e.g., ability to calm the body, regulate impulses, self-soothe, manage post-traumatic symptoms triggered by mundane events.

The goal of this stage is to create a safe and stable "life in the here-and-now," allowing you to safely remember the trauma, rather than continue to re-live it.

Stage II: Coming to Terms with Traumatic Memories

At this stage, the focus is to overcome the fear of traumatic memories so they can be integrated, allowing appreciation for the person you have become as a result of the trauma. In order to metabolize (not just verbalize) memories, you may make use of EMDR or other mind-body therapies. Pacing ensures that you don't become "stuck" in avoidance or overwhelmed by memories and flashbacks. Since "remembering is not recovering," the goal is to come to terms with the traumatic past.

Stage III: Integration and Moving On

You can now begin to work on decreasing shame and alienation, developing a greater capacity for healthy attachment, and taking up personal and professional goals that reflect post-traumatic meaning-making. Overcoming fears of normal life, healthy challenge and change, and intimacy become the focus of the work. As your life becomes reconsolidated around a healthy present and a healed self, the trauma feels farther away, part of an integrated understanding of self but no longer a daily focus.