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When the Past Is Still Running the Present

Understanding trauma, survival responses, and the patterns that can outlive them

Trauma can affect more than memories of what happened. It can shape what a person learns about safety, trust, control, vulnerability, relationships, and themselves. Those lessons can continue influencing reactions long after the original situation has ended.

The purpose of this worksheet is not to retell traumatic events in detail. It is to notice how past experiences may still be influencing present-day reactions, choices, and recovery.

A response can make sense in the environment where it developed and still create problems in the environment you live in now.

What Trauma Can Change

Safety The nervous system may stay alert even when the immediate danger is gone.	**Trust** Depending on other people may feel risky, even when connection is wanted.
Control Uncertainty may feel threatening, creating a strong need to manage people, situations, or outcomes.	**Vulnerability** Being emotionally open may feel unsafe, weak, or too exposing.
Relationships Closeness, conflict, rejection, or distance may activate old protective responses.	**Self-worth** A person may carry beliefs about being damaged, unworthy, responsible, or not enough.

A More Useful Question

Instead of only asking...	Try asking...
"What is wrong with me?"	*"What did I learn to do to protect myself?"*

What is one present-day reaction or pattern I would like to understand better?

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_____

_____

Where do I notice this pattern affecting my life today?

_____

_____

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Trauma Does Not Always Look the Same

Different ways overwhelming experiences can affect people over time

Trauma can develop in different ways. Sometimes it follows one overwhelming event. Sometimes it develops through repeated experiences over months or years. Sometimes it is connected to relationships, childhood, illness, violence, loss, or prolonged instability.

Two people can experience similar events and be affected very differently. Age, previous experiences, support, a sense of control, and what happened afterward all matter. These categories can overlap. They are ways of understanding experience, not diagnoses that have to fit perfectly.

Acute / Single-Incident A specific overwhelming event such as an assault, serious accident, disaster, sudden violent loss, or life-threatening event.	**Chronic** Repeated or ongoing exposure to threatening, harmful, or destabilizing experiences over time.	**Complex** Multiple or repeated traumatic experiences, often involving important relationships and long periods of instability.
Developmental Trauma during childhood or adolescence while the brain, identity, emotional skills, and relationship expectations are still developing.	**Relational / Attachment** Harm, neglect, betrayal, abandonment, coercion, or unpredictability within relationships that were expected to provide safety.	**Medical** Serious illness, painful treatment, emergency procedures, frightening diagnoses, or experiences of helplessness involving the body or healthcare.
Traumatic Loss Loss that is sudden, violent, disturbing, or experienced as overwhelming. Grief and trauma can overlap without being the same thing.	**Secondary / Vicarious** Trauma-related effects that can develop through repeated exposure to other people's suffering, stories, or crises.	**Community / Intergenerational** Large-scale experiences such as war, displacement, community violence, discrimination, or severe instability can shape families and communities across time.

The goal is not to decide whose experience was "bad enough." A more useful question is: What did I experience, what did I learn from it, and how might those lessons still affect me today?

Which descriptions, if any, help me understand something about my own experience?

_____

_____

_____

What did those experiences teach me about safety, trust, control, relationships, or myself?

_____

_____

_____

Survival Responses

Fight, flight, freeze, and appease are ways the nervous system tries to protect us

When the nervous system detects danger, it does not always wait for careful analysis. Protective responses can happen quickly and automatically. These responses are not character flaws. They are attempts to create safety, reduce threat, or regain control.

People may use more than one response, and the response can change depending on the situation. The goal is not to judge the reaction. The goal is to recognize it early enough to have more choice.

FIGHT Anger, defensiveness, arguing, becoming intimidating, controlling, pushing harder, blaming, or needing to be right. Protective message: "I need to overpower the threat."	**FLIGHT** Avoiding, leaving, staying constantly busy, overworking, using substances, scrolling, distracting, or keeping emotional distance. Protective message: "I need to get away from this."
FREEZE Shutting down, going blank, feeling numb, procrastinating, dissociating, struggling to decide, or feeling unable to act. Protective message: "If I do nothing, maybe I can get through this."	**APPEASE** People-pleasing, saying yes when meaning no, avoiding conflict, taking responsibility for other people's feelings, or abandoning personal needs. Protective message: "If I keep everyone okay, I may be safe."

Which survival response do I recognize most often in myself?

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_____

_____

What kinds of situations tend to bring it out?

_____

_____

_____

How does this response try to protect me, and what does it cost me now?

_____

_____

_____

It Worked Then. Does It Work Now?

Understanding the difference between an old adaptation and a present-day solution

Many trauma-related patterns began as adaptations. Staying quiet, watching other people's moods, disconnecting from feelings, controlling the environment, keeping everyone happy, or finding fast relief may once have helped a person get through something difficult.

A pattern can be understandable and still become costly. The question is not whether it once made sense. The question is whether it still fits the life, relationships, and recovery a person is trying to build now.

What once helped me survive may not be what helps me live well now.

Looking at the Pattern

What I learned to do	What it may have protected me from	How it affects me now
Keep everyone happy	Conflict, anger, or rejection	I ignore my needs and struggle with boundaries

What is one pattern I am beginning to see differently?

_____

_____

_____

What would a more present-day response look like?

_____

_____

_____

When the Present Feels Like the Past

A trigger can activate an old alarm even when the current situation is different

A trigger is anything that cues the nervous system to respond as though danger may be present. Sometimes the connection is obvious. Other times it may be a tone of voice, facial expression, conflict, feeling trapped, being ignored, uncertainty, closeness, criticism, or loss of control.

Being triggered does not automatically mean the current situation is safe, and it does not automatically mean it is dangerous. The goal is to slow the reaction enough to separate what is happening now from what the nervous system may be remembering.



Walk Through One Recent Situation

What happened?

_____

_____

_____

What did I notice in my body?

_____

_____

What emotion showed up first?

_____

_____

What did my mind immediately tell me was happening?

_____

_____

_____

What did I want to do?

_____

_____

What was true about the present situation that was different from the past?

_____

_____

_____

What did I actually need in that moment?

_____

_____

What Did I Learn to Believe?

Trauma can leave beliefs behind long after the original situation has ended

Repeated experiences can shape beliefs about the self, other people, and the world. These beliefs may feel like facts because they developed through real experiences. But a belief that once helped explain or predict danger may not describe every present-day situation.

ABOUT MYSELF	ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE	ABOUT THE WORLD
I am not enough. Something is wrong with me. My needs do not matter. I am responsible for everyone. I cannot handle difficult feelings.	People always leave. People cannot be trusted. If I let someone close, I will get hurt. Conflict means the relationship is unsafe.	I am never really safe. Something bad is always about to happen. I have to stay in control. If I relax, I will be caught off guard.

Examine One Belief

A belief I developed:

_____

_____

Why did that belief once make sense?

_____

_____

_____

How does believing it affect my life, relationships, or recovery today?

_____

_____

_____

What evidence supports it? What evidence does not fit it?

_____

_____

_____

What may be a more accurate belief now?

_____

_____

_____

A more accurate belief does not erase what happened. It helps the present become larger than the past.

From Automatic Reaction to Present-Day Choice

The goal is not to eliminate every reaction. It is to create more room between the reaction and the response.

Trauma-related responses can happen quickly. Practicing a deliberate sequence can help the nervous system and the thinking mind reconnect before an automatic reaction takes over.

1 NOTICE What is happening in my body? What changed first?
2 NAME What emotion or survival response is showing up?
3 ORIENT What is actually happening right now? Where am I? Who is here?
4 SEPARATE What belongs to the present, and what may belong to the past?
5 CHOOSE What response fits the situation I am in today?

What I No Longer Have to Do to Survive

I no longer have to:

_____

_____

_____

I am learning that I can:

_____

_____

_____

One response I want to practice instead:

_____

_____

_____

My Support Plan When I Feel Activated

A person I can contact	Something that helps my body settle	A place or environment that feels safer

Healing does not require pretending the past did not happen. It means learning that the strategies that once protected us do not have to make every decision for us now.