

How Do We Heal From Betrayal Trauma?

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ADOH: Judith Herman's second book (2015) Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror: (page 211) "Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete. The impact of a traumatic event continues to reverberate throughout the survivor's lifecycle. Issues that were sufficiently resolved at one stage of recovery may be reawakened as the survivor reaches new milestones in her development. Marriage or divorce, a birth or "death in the family, illness or retirement, are frequent occasions for a resurgence of traumatic memories...Though resolution is never complete, it is often sufficient for the survivor to turn her attention from the tasks of recovery to the tasks of ordinary life."

The good news is that there is hope for recovery and healing from any kind of trauma including Betrayal Trauma. The approach to your healing follows a path well worn by trauma survivors and is adapted for use with this particular demographic. It approached trauma recovery from a three-stage approach. What follows is an overview of what you might expect to be covered in each stage:

Betrayal Trauma Recovery Stage 1 – Safety and Stabilization

In this stage we will be most concerned with finding some safety and stability amongst the post discovery mess! In the first stage of trauma healing you can expect to feel supported and validated throughout. You should expect to find space to express yourself in response to the turmoil that your life has just been thrown into and be helped to identify your immediate needs in this situation.

You will be supported to manage any crisis that has developed with the discovery.

Here we will address issues relating to all aspects of safety; emotional, physical, spiritual, sexual and financial. You will likely be encouraged to undertake a health screen to rule out the possibility of Sexually Transmitted Infections and, where your physical health is impacted, for example by lack of sleep, weight loss or significant distress that becomes unmanageable on a day to day basis, assessment by a medical doctor may be encouraged.

There will be conversation about the reactions of the addict to discovery and whether there are any threats to your safety or the safety of others, most notably any children, in the home. If such a threat is discerned you will be supported to make a plan to address that. Your emotional safety will also be addressed, with an emphasis on avoiding further trauma by seeking details that you may find traumatic in the longer term and assessing your vulnerability to emotional abuse through gaslighting and verbal abuse.

There will likely be some conversation about immediate boundary needs whilst you stabilize yourself as well as longer term boundaries beyond the crisis stage. Your financial stability may be discussed as it relates to your ability to care for yourself. You will be supported in implementing coping skills for emotional regulation and identifying safe people to lean on.

You will be provided with resources and education on both trauma and sex addiction and may use this information to plan for all eventualities moving forward with a focus on creating safety, no matter what happens.

This stage will also cover the possibility of a therapeutic disclosure and polygraph as a means of avoiding the traumatic experience of staggered disclosure, where information is drip fed over a period of time, after many assertions of the fact that the full truth is now known.

Whilst there is no specific timeline for each phase of healing, it is important to recognize that this is a long term healing process. It is also not a linear or 'end to end' process and there are likely to be a number of bumps in the road, setbacks and occasions where you find yourself circling back on some items.

Of course, the behavior of the addict has much to do with the ease with which you pass through each stage. The aim, at every stage, will be for you to feel empowered to heal, with or without the support and assistance of your addicted partner.

Betrayal Trauma Recovery Stage 2 – Remembering and Mourning

In Stage 2 you will be digging deeper into the traumatic after effects and learning to process the trauma, loss and grief experienced as a result of the betrayal. This season is about facing the reality in which you now reside.

I sometimes think of this as the FEELING stage, where, in the midst of the new safety you have created (and continue to create and uphold) in stage 1, you are able to create time and space to feel the emotion produced by the trauma. This is a delicate balance of courage and pacing. To heal from the trauma and grief we must be prepared to feel it and allow the pain to ‘pass through’ but we must do so carefully and sensitively so as not to become overwhelmed.

This stage of healing is best conducted under the care of a well trained professional for those reasons. This phase includes telling your story, often repeatedly, which can help you to come to terms with the traumatic memories by ‘making sense’ of what has happened. Telling your story also helps to name, explore and mourn the losses you have experienced and break down some of the dissociative effects of the trauma.

You may also be encouraged to explore other therapeutic options, including some of the emerging treatments that are proving effective in trauma recovery such as EMDR and Somatic treatments. These modalities aim to approach trauma healing from the holistic ‘body, mind and soul’ perspective as understanding of the impact of trauma on the body, and its ability to be held and stored at a cellular level is increasingly understood and accepted.

This stage is likely to build on the trigger response and emotional regulation work begun in phase 1 as you gain a deeper understanding of how your trauma triggers impact you and begin to reclaim and reframe some of your experiences. Here you will be encouraged to see the progress you are making in dealing with triggers and unwanted emotion as ‘fuel for the fight’, proving that you have the tools, resources and resilience needed to remain on the road to healing and thrive.

Stage 2 may include additional work for those whose relationships end in long term separation or divorce. This is a traumatic event, in and of itself and will require some deeper processing during this period.

Betrayal Trauma Recovery Stage 3 – Reconnecting

Stage 3 invites you to reconnect with the world around you. This is about integrating your story into the bigger story of your life, where the traumatic experience is no longer the only experience that defines you, but part of a larger pool of ‘life experiences’ which have shaped who you are. Here you will begin to feel more acceptance than resistance as you continue to ‘come to terms’ with the life you now live, whatever that means for you as an individual.

This stage will look different for those who have made the decision to remain in relationship with the addicted partner, than for those for whom this has not been possible. Indeed, this may be the point at which some of those decisions are made.

For those whose relationships have not survived the discovery of the addictive or problematic behaviour, this phase of healing will include working towards a new sense of self and identity. It will allow for vision casting, creating a vision for the future and examining all of the possibilities this offers. There will be questions around those possibilities to be confronted, such as the possibility of any future relationships and where you find meaning and purpose going forward. There will also be the practical aspects of co-parenting and healthy separation for those in that position.

For those who remain in relationships, this period will focus on reconnection. There are the challenging topics of trust, intimacy, sex and forgiveness in this stage which will need to be addressed sensitively and with patience and grace. Couples work may include assistance with communication and conflict management as well as emotional intimacy and sexual reintegration. There are also opportunities for couples to create a vision for their future relationship, built on an understanding that things will not be the same as they were before the discovery/disclosure.

Across the board, this phase encourages you to make meaning from what you have been through and to use that meaning to develop the identity of a ‘thrivor’, no longer a victim but a VICTOR. This is also where many of us begin to feel a desire to use our experiences for the greater good and as a means of giving something back.

This is the stage at which you will try new things and learn more about who you are and what you could be. You will be encouraged to assess the skills that have brought you this far and capitalize them to take you even further, integrating them into your life and as part of your ability to care for yourself in the future.