

Skills I've Learned for Reduction of Trauma Based Maladaptive Behaviors

By Seasons

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Resources

Bradshaw, John. (1988). *Healing the Shame that Binds You*. Health Communications, Inc.: Deerfield Beach, Florida

Linehan, Marsha. (1993). *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder*. Guilford Press.

National Center for Trauma Based Disorders. (2007) *Patient Handbook and Workbook*. Two Rivers Psychiatric Hospital: Kansas City, Missouri

* This article contains information adapted from the above listed resources.

As survivors of either childhood or adult sexual trauma we many times develop coping skills that are maladaptive. They are maladaptive in that they do not result in one's becoming better and closer to healing but rather they result in not being able to adjust to life as it comes our way. If one's trauma occurred during childhood or adolescence, then the coping skills used to survive are congruent with that person's developmental age. This means that the skills utilized are carried over from earlier stages of development. The same skills that kept us alive as a child or adolescent become ineffective as adults. They become coping mechanisms that are not useful or advantageous to adult life but rather stifle a person's personal growth and adjustment to ongoing life. Examples of these maladaptive coping mechanisms are as follows:

- Dissociation: spacing out, zoning off, going out of body, or becoming someone entirely different
- Self Harm: any form of hurting one's own body or even one's own mind. Cutting, burning, negative self talk...
- Addictions: alcohol, drugs, gambling, sexual, self harm...
- Poor Interpersonal Boundaries: staying with someone who abuses you, never being able to say no, mind reading...

These maladaptive coping mechanisms are also a great source of one's retraumatization. They often cause out of control emotional responses such as deep shame, distorted thought processes, and behaviors that result in negative life consequences.

If this information sounds discouraging, don't worry, it's not the whole story of our lives. The fact that we are survivors tells the story of our strengths and our courage despite the negative coping behaviors we may struggle with. However, it is my goal to share with other survivors things that are helping me to become a thriving survivor rather than just a surviving survivor. In 1998 I graduated with a bachelors of science in psychology. I thought I had really achieved something, and in fact it was a good achievement. However, of all the psychological theory and statistics I learned, I knew very little about how to care for my own needs. Growing up in my family of origin with the sexual and physical abuse, neglect, and domestic violence, I learned very poor ways of coping with daily life. Then as if by some heinous twist of fate I married my first husband who was very abusive both physically and emotionally. Finally, at age 40 I am beginning to learn and utilize healthy and adaptive coping skills. It took me really examining my

own life and my own behaviors to realize I was not content with how things were going. Often I have felt as though there were a huge gaping hole in my heart all open and raw. I have felt out of control with my emotions or have felt dead as though I have no emotions at all.

Listed below are some of the cognitive and behavioral methods I have learned. If utilized, these skills along with some trained professional help and a good social support network, are tools for healing and personal growth.

1.) Grounding - This is a skill that utilizes the five senses to assist a person in staying present in the now. You do this by thinking of as many ways as possible to use sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell to place yourself in the now. This can be utilized daily as needed for help with dissociation, self harm urges, flashbacks, and body memories.

2.) Containment - This is a storage box that can be either literal or imagined. Negative or unwanted thoughts that result in negative uncontrollable emotions are stored in the containment box until you are able to acquire help to better process them. This can be done by decorating a pencil box and writing down flashbacks and negative thoughts and placing them in the box for work at a later time. This helps as often as needed for unwanted thoughts, cognitive distortions, strong uncontrollable emotions, memories, and/or urges.

3.) Safe Place - This is a place you create in your mind. It has to be a safe, comfortable place where you go by yourself, unless you choose to go there with your higher power. It can be a beautiful beach, a bubbling brook, a forest, or it can be a recliner in front of a fire place. It is a place you go to in your mind when the stress of flash backs, triggers, body memories, or emotional turmoil occur.

4.) Affirmations - These are positive words of encouragement, insight, and/or wisdom that are self affirming. You can make up your own or you can read them from books of positive affirmations. They are best if used as often as possible to replace negative thoughts.

5.) Changing Cognitive Distortions - This means to change the negative irrational thought processes we have with more rational positive thoughts. Included in this article is a list of common cognitive distortions.

The following is a list of methods of grounding. There are two basic types of grounding, mental and physical.

Mental Grounding:

- Describe your environment in detail using all of your senses.
- Think of your favorites, such as favorite ice cream, color, animal, place...
- Remember a safe place, describing it in detail.
- Remember the words to a favorite song.
- Repeat a favorite saying over and over again such as, "the serenity prayer" or "the 23rd Psalm".

Physical Grounding

- Run cool or warm water over your hands
- Grip something tightly

- Stretch
- Touch various objects around you
- Carry a grounding object in your pocket such as a small stone or a piece of jewelry.

The following is a small list of affirmations:

- I love the child I was and the child I am.
- I love myself.
- I trust I am capable.
- I deserve self respect.
- I am free to be me; this too shall pass.
- I am resourceful.
- I have the courage to explore my shadow side.
- I can do whatever I set my mind to.
- I fill my mind with peaceful thoughts.
- I take time to open my heart to rainbows.
- I have courage to focus on beauty even in the midst of pain.

The following is a list of common cognitive distortions:

1. All or nothing thinking – The tendency to categorize things into black and white, absolute extremes, such as good or bad, success or failure.
2. Overgeneralization - Making an overall conclusion based on only one piece of evidence.
3. Mental Filter – The tendency to pick out selective details of a situation and focus on them to the exclusion of other relevant aspects of the situation. Example: several people give you positive feedback but you dwell only on the one negative comment.
4. Rose colored glasses – A type of mental filter where you delete any negative aspects of your reality leading to suppressed sadness.
5. Magnification – The tendency to exaggerate things way out of proportion
6. Catastrophizing – An extreme form of magnification where one sees the worse possible outcome of any situation.
7. Minimization – The tendency to shrink things or downplay their importance. Example: I only have a couple of drinks when I go out.
8. Discounting the positive – A form of minimization where you believe your own good qualities or accomplishments don't count.
9. Mind reading – assuming what others are thinking or feeling without checking it out first
10. Fortune telling – is when you predict the future will turn out negative, based on your own fears or negative thoughts
11. Emotional reasoning – Using emotion feelings to prove a certain irrational thought. Example: I feel terrible and nothing will ever get better.
12. Bodily reasoning – A bodily feeling proves an irrational belief. Example: The arousal means I'm dirty and shameful.
13. Should statements – unrealistic and perfectionist rules you set that make it difficult to live in the real world. “must, have to, ought, and need to” can be distorted too. Example: I should have stopped the abuse.
14. Labeling – Using emotionally charged words to describe yourself or someone else.

15. Personalizing – The tendency to blame yourself unnecessarily for something you are not totally responsible for

16. Blaming – Making someone else or certain circumstances responsible for choices or decisions that are actually your own responsibility.

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