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HOW WE GROW THROUGH WHAT WE GO THROUGH

Self-Compassion Practices
for Post-Traumatic Growth



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO



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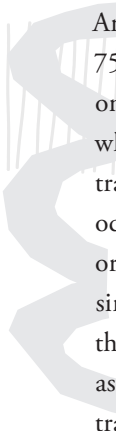
CHAPTER ONE

Wired for Resilience



Trauma changes everything—from our bodies and brains to our relationships with others and the world. When we experience a severe mental, emotional, or physical injury, we trade perspective, growth, and learning for safety—at least temporarily.

Just about everyone and everything living will experience some kind of trauma at some point, and everyone will react differently and heal differently. More men will experience trauma, but more women will experience complications of trauma and develop PTSD, at least in the reporting. Marginalized groups—people pushed to the edges of an unequal society—are even more likely to experience trauma and the compounding effects of trauma, with less access to healing resources. For some, the body's response may lock in and linger; for others it will fade. But all of us are capable of growth and change, no matter what we have experienced.



Amazingly, research indicates that although 75 percent of us will experience trauma, only 8 to 12 percent will experience PTSD, whereas 60 percent will experience post-traumatic growth (PTG). These are good odds. Even better news: this isn't an either/or situation. PTSD and PTG can happen simultaneously. Neuroscience indicates that growth and pain happen together, just as nearly every spiritual and philosophical tradition teaches.

Let me be clear that trauma and recovery from it are awful, wrenching, slow, unpredictable, and never linear. Nothing can fully soothe our pain all of the time. Tips from friends, therapists, or memes will never “fix” us or make us as we were before. We can't understand each other's pain fully, but we can recognize and witness it in each other—not to fix it or ask it to be fixed, not to try to fix ourselves, but to be with and witness our pain. It is easier to show up and be present for ourselves and others when we have some tools to manage and regulate our trauma responses.

You may be asking yourself if your pain is bad enough to count as trauma. The cliché goes that trauma is a normal reaction to an abnormal event, and it's true. It affects

each of us differently, because “normal” and “abnormal” themselves are subjective. Our built-in stress and trauma responses are there to protect us during *and after* a painful experience, and they protect us from future traumas. We end up rewired with sensory triggers for people, places, and things that our nervous systems still believe are dangerous. Over time, when this response becomes automatic and outlives its usefulness, it’s labeled as a “disorder,” when in fact our nervous systems are just trying to create order out of chaos. In fact, it might be simpler to consider this book as a means of attending to, befriending, resetting, and re-regulating your dysregulated nervous system rather than engaging in a debate about what “counts” as a trauma.

The defenses we fire up under threat are normal and evolutionary. They helped our ancestors and us to survive. The worse or longer the threat, however, the more they rewire our brains. These responses kick into gear when we perceive threat, not necessarily when a threat is there.

Let me say that again: they kick into gear when we *perceive* threat, not necessarily when a threat is there.

With that, let’s explore the typical ways we respond to stress and trauma. These are remnants from our ancestors who lived in a far more dangerous world, though it might not seem that way. What was a trauma to our ancestors in times when we were closer to the

animals we evolved from? Imagine a lion chasing you. What can you do to survive? I once asked this of an audience in Texas, and there was an actual lion tamer in the audience. Honestly, if she could self-regulate to the point that she could get into a cage with a lion, I don't know why she showed up for my mindfulness class! If *you* are a lion tamer, maybe you can skip ahead.

The Four Fs

There are four ways that we can respond to the attacking lion. Each one of these responses activates our nervous systems for survival in one of two ways, hyperarousal or hypoarousal.

Hyperarousal

1. Fight – Fight off the attacker. This is great if there's a wild animal chasing you, but not great if the "threat" is a traffic jam, a colleague who's getting under your skin, or something that reminds you of your own personal lion. When we fall back on this response, we react with physical or relational aggression or irritability. Sometimes, when we blame ourselves, this flips into aggression toward ourselves in the form of self-harm or risky behavior.

2. Flee – Avoid or evade the attack. This is great if it's a slow lion or you're a fast runner. Not so great if we avoid every situation that's uncomfortable or triggers

us. Over time, avoidance can hardwire itself into ongoing anxiety, panic, agoraphobia, and more. Avoidance may also manifest as running toward high-stimulation distractions, addictions, and compulsions.

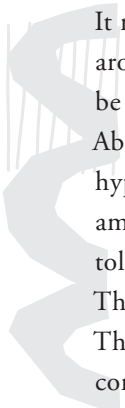
Hypoarousal

3. Freeze – Hide or camouflage yourself, and try not to be noticed. Perhaps you play dead and give up, waiting for the attack to be over. Hypoarousal may become deliberate avoidance or unconscious dissociation over time. For many from marginalized groups, standing out may feel or be especially dangerous, and this kind of response is truly adaptive for physical, emotional, and even financial safety.

4. Fuck it – Okay, I haven't seen hypoarousal referred to clinically as such! You can also call this "faint or flop." Giving up protects us from lasting trauma in a different way, with "learned helplessness"—a feeling that we have no control or power over our fate. This can wire our brains into depression, a slow giving-up on ourselves and the world, or avoidance strategies like blunting the experience with addiction.

A big enough single, traumatic event or an extensive, long-term trauma rewires our brains to stay in these stress responses all the time. This is the darker

side of neuroplasticity. Unless you're a lion tamer, the lion attack is likely a metaphor for something that happened in your life. You likely responded with one or more of these four Fs. That may be how you are still responding to life, long after the lion has gone.



It might sound strange, but our overall arousal level for everyday challenges should be about 60 percent to 80 percent stressed. Above this we're in hyperarousal, with hypoarousal beyond that. It's the right amount of stress within that window of tolerance that helps us grow at the edges. This is the zone where the "magic" happens. That may or may not be "outside your comfort zone," as the meme says, but we have to stay within our safety zone if we want to truly grow. The key to your recovery from trauma is recognizing when you enter your "red" or danger zone and learning how to get back to your safety/growth zone.

Polyvagal theory provides some science behind the magic. Psychologist and researcher Stephen Porges, PhD, and his colleague Deb Dana, LCSW, along with others, have pioneered a new understanding

of emotional, social, and physiological regulation based on the functioning of the vagus nerve. This nerve—actually two nerves on either side of the body—is like the information superhighway between the mind and the body. It is the physiology behind a third aspect of our nervous system called the social engagement system, according to Porges. Polyvagal theory has become central to the understanding and treatment of trauma, with more discoveries yet to come.

The reality is, we *need* a stress and fear response. The right amount of fear keeps us safe, and stress can motivate us. If you are in an abusive relationship, it might be safer to be hypoaroused for safety until you can escape. If your military unit is called up, hyperarousal may be exactly what is required. These reactions are warranted and keep you safe. In fact, when a researcher named Arthur Kling removed the amygdala—the brain’s alarm system—from a group of captured monkeys and released them back into the wild (this was not the most compassionate research project!) the monkeys were all dead within weeks, having failed to recognize and respond to the dangers around them.

Polyvagal chart

	Freeze or flop	Fight or flight
Arousal Level	Below 30%: Hypoarousal Zone, Dorsal vagal/ parasympathetic nervous system activated, Outside the window of tolerance	Above 80%: Hyperarousal Zone, Sympathetic nervous system activated, Outside the window of tolerance
Body	Defensive, shrinking posture, Slow and shallow breathing, Lower blood pressure and heart rate, Reduced immunity, Slow metabolism and high energy food cravings, Cortisol levels lead to physical exhaustion and immobility	Threatening posture, Short, shallow, uneven breathing, Heightened blood pressure and heart rate, Immune system shuts down, Digestive system freezes, Adrenaline, testosterone and cortisol levels lead to aggression and activation toward action
Emotions	Overwhelmed, Giving up, Ashamed, Low confidence, Low motivation Dissociation, Hopelessness	Anxiety, Panic, Fear, Frustration, Rage, Irritation, Panic, Challenged
Perceptions	Scanning for signals to reinforce ways to hide/ avoid.	Increase in range of color and sound perception, Neutral social cues perceived as hostile
Brain State and Cognition	Reduced neural activity and reduced cognitive function, Slowed mental processes, Low motivation	Amygdala activated, Outer cortices deactivated, Personalizing, Catastrophizing, Negativity bias, Pessimism, Either/ or, rigid thinking, Impulses deactivated
Social	Eye contact and body language shrink, Voice quiet and meek, Avoiding rather than approaching, Isolation, Mistrust, Withdrawal	Eye contact and body language become threatening, Voice agitated and loud, Relational and empathic abilities shut down, Blaming, Scapegoating

	Hurt, not harmed	Attend and befriend
Arousal Level	60-80%: Growth Zone, Nervous system awake and active, Within the window of tolerance	50%: Comfort Zone, Ventral Vagal State, Within the window of tolerance.
Body	Upright confident posture, Breathing deep and slow, 5-6 cycles per minute, Heart rate steady, Immune and digestive systems operating, Oxytocin and testosterone levels boost confidence	Relaxed posture, Breath regulated and slow, Heart slow, circulation flowing evenly, Immune and digestive systems operating optimally, Oxytocin level blocks cortisol, creating room for attachment and feelings of safety
Emotions	Discomfort that does not overwhelm, Engagement, Excitement, Safety, Flow states, High motivation Gratitude, Compassion, Self-compassion, Rising to a challenge	Satisfaction, Grounded, Safe, Warm, Comfortable, Secure, Connected, In control, Not challenged
Perceptions	Accurate and clear, Full range of sensory perception, Finding and seeking meaning, Mindfulness	Largely accurate, Scanning for signs that reinforce safety.
Brain State and Cognition	Outer cortices activated, Well-regulated ,Peak cognitive performance, Critical and nuanced thinking Planning, Impulse control, Setting goals, Active learning, Stretching limits, Curiosity activated	Brain thinking clearly but not overactivated, Clear thinking, Regulated thoughts Unchallenged, Low risk, low reward.
Social	Eyes take in a large middle range of stimuli, Full range of movement, Voice is steady and even, Empathy for and connection to others	Eye movement and senses somewhat reduced, not scanning for danger, Full range of movement, Voice lower and slower Social brain active

Fundamentally, the Four Fs are useful strategies—until they aren't! Like the soldier who scans the highway for the next IED long after arriving home, the cancer survivor who anticipates illness at every ache, or the betrayed spouse who blows up every new relationship as soon as it feels intimate, we may end up hypervigilant after a trauma—scanning for and perceiving danger constantly—because we believe it can keep us safe. For some, even long after a trauma, danger can feel safely familiar, self-harm and addiction might become soothing, disordered eating could create feelings of order, isolation might feel comforting, and connection and compassion could seem overwhelming. And it's not just a mental response: our bodies also stay stuck in these Four Fs. Our responses to trauma help us in the moment and keep us alive, yet they can also interfere with our physical health, mental health, and relationships.

So if these Four Fs are our automatic responses, handed to us by our ancestors and etched onto our DNA for our survival, what can we do to reset ourselves? The answer, thankfully, is *a lot*. Other responses are also built into our DNA, and we can strengthen them through practice. Growing research tells us that it's hard to think our way into a new way of acting and feeling, but we really can act our way into a new way of thinking, feeling, and being. But before we get to that, let's pause here and reflect.