

# Trauma Narrative

A self-paced workbook to help you on your journey to heal

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**Ascension EAP**

[www.ascensionWIEAP.org](http://www.ascensionWIEAP.org)

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## Introduction

### Is This Workbook For Me?

Most people have at least a few cringe-worthy memories. For example, that time your pants ripped open on the bus, or when you got into an argument with your spouse and made a very public scene. Yes, we all have regrettable memories like those, that maybe still elicit feelings of embarrassment or remorse.

But sometimes our memories run much deeper, are more painful, and still cause significant distress even months or years after the event. Like when you can't think about instances from your childhood without your heart racing and feelings of panic, or you can still see, hear and smell that terrible car accident from years ago. These memories are more than just uncomfortable embarrassment or regret; maybe they feel like a punch to the gut. Maybe you find it difficult to breathe, or even think when you are confronted with "triggers" or reminders of these events.



If you have memories that still cause reactions like this, then this workbook may be for you. The purpose of the trauma narrative is to help you gradually process past experiences so that you can think about and remember events without significant stress reactions.

**This workbook does not take the place of professional counseling with a trained therapist.**

There are some individuals who should not use this workbook without the help of a professional who can help assess for safety and ensure your well being throughout the process. Many people find that they can work through distressing memories on their own, or with the help of supportive friends and loved ones. Others, however, may find that stirring up memories of the past becomes so distressing that they begin to panic or feel so agitated that they begin to think about harming themselves or someone else. If this is the case for you, please stop right here and call your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or another mental health professional.

On the other hand, if you feel confident working through difficult memories in a self-paced workbook format like this, you will find effective yet challenging work here on your path to healing.

## Getting Started

The strategies and processes outlined in this book have been strongly validated by scientific research to be effective tools in trauma processing and healing. The first several pages are all about improving your self awareness and emotion regulation skills. These are important skills when dealing with any kind of stress or distress in life, but will be essential as you move on to the more challenging part of the workbook, the trauma narrative.

A trauma narrative is a scientifically valid way of coping with and healing from trauma. Many trauma therapists have been trained in this method of counseling, and many people realize that they have intuitively engaged in similar techniques, without the help of a therapist, as they coped with and healed from traumatic circumstances on their own. The process in this workbook, however, is strategically designed to help you ease into trauma work without being overwhelmed by it. (If, at any time, you do become overwhelmed please call your EAP or another mental health professional who can support you through this difficult work.)

**We highly recommend doing each of the pages in order**, as each exercise builds upon the last. Sometimes you may want to take a few days, or even weeks to work on one skill before moving on to the next. You can start or stop at any time, and if it gets to be too much, it's completely fine (and recommended) to take a break.

It is easy to navigate through this workbook using the links to each section in the Table of Contents. Throughout the text you will find links to special worksheets or resources in the appendix. You will also find reflection questions to consider, and prompts for you to take notes and make commitments to yourself. **You will need a notebook or journal** to jot down your answers and write notes, or you can print this workbook and write directly on the pages.

### Writing things down is a very important part of the work.

Writing things down activates more areas of your brain and will help you process and remember information on a deeper level. Although it's easier and less time consuming to just think about the reflection questions and move on, you will get the most out of this workbook if you take just a little extra time to write things down. To get started, consider the reflection questions below and jot down your thoughts, feelings and reactions to this workbook.

Are you ready?

## Introduction Reflection Questions

**How am I feeling about starting this work?**

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**What fears do I have?**

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**What am I hopeful about?**

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**What are my goals for this process?**

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**Who will support me on my journey?**

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## What is Trauma?

### Fight or Flight, Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress

Imagine this: you're walking to the bathroom in the middle of the night. The hallway is dark, and you're still mostly sleeping. All of a sudden, a dark figure pops out of the doorway and shouts, "BOOO!!" In a millisecond, hormones flood your body, causing simultaneous reactions and sensations from head to toe. Your hands fly up to your face, you scream, your pupils dilate, your immune system is suppressed, your digestion shuts down. Blood rushes to your muscles, and your body tenses, posed for quick action. You're no longer half asleep, but wide awake, adrenaline pumping through your veins. Your heart is racing, and you can't think clearly, but your brain is taking in vivid sensory information such as colors, sounds, and smells.



If you've had an experience like this I would like to extend my congratulations! Your sympathetic nervous system is working just as it is supposed to!

### Fight or Flight

Our sympathetic nervous system (also known as "fight or flight" or "stress response") is probably activated more than we realize — even several times a day. For example, you turn on the news and see more fatalities, or your boss sends you an email: "We need to talk."

You might notice just a few of the sensations noted above (racing heart, faster breathing, etc.) but in most instances, after a few minutes your body will relax, your heart rate will slow down, and your breathing will go back to normal. Your PARAsympathetic nervous system (also known as "rest & digest" system) kicks in and brings you back into balance.

This workbook will teach you strategies to activate your rest & digest system a little faster when your fight or flight kicks in, and also tame your fight or flight system so it's not so reactive to the world around you.

For more information about the fight or flight system and how to tame it, go to the [Fight or Flight worksheet in Appendix A](#) of this workbook.

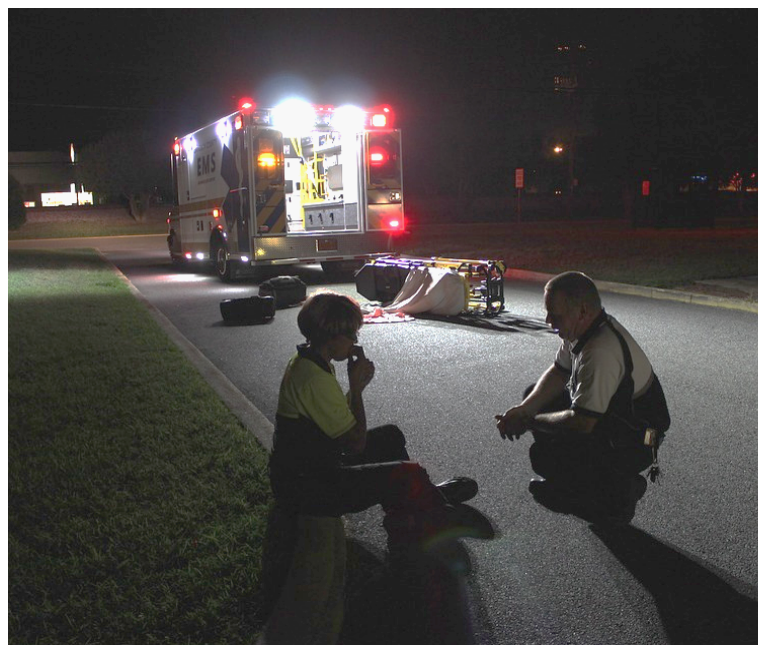
## Trauma

Trauma isn't just a stressful or startling situation. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) defines trauma as "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence." Google states that trauma is "a deeply distressing or disturbing experience." Examples of traumatic events may include:

- Sexual assault
- Child abuse
- Violence
- Disasters
- Motor accidents
- Gruesome emergencies
- Domestic violence
- Suicide

And no doubt, when a person experiences a traumatic event, their fight or flight system is highly activated, and may even cause lasting symptoms known as "post traumatic stress reactions." Reactions may include:

- Physical
  - Lack of appetite
  - Difficulty sleeping
  - Irritability or agitation
  - Fatigue or exhaustion
- Mental
  - Flashbacks of the event
  - Dreams or nightmares
  - Reactivity to reminders of the event
  - Difficulty concentrating
- Emotional
  - Feeling rattled or unstable
  - Feeling vulnerable
  - Feeling anxious or depressed
  - Experiencing wide mood swings
  - Drawing closer to family or friends (traumatic bonding)
  - Maybe a new perspective on life or faith



**Post traumatic stress reactions are normal and usually dissipate over time.**

It is important to note that not everyone will be deeply affected by traumatic events, while others may be significantly impacted. Occasionally a person may develop post traumatic stress disorder.



## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can only be diagnosed by a mental health professional, and only after a month has passed after exposure to a traumatic event. If, after one month, you are still experiencing significant post traumatic stress reactions that are interfering with your daily life, you may want to consider being evaluated for PTSD.

Here are some of the symptoms your mental health professional will want to know about:

- Re-experiencing the traumatic event through:
  - Intrusive memories
  - Recurrent dreams
  - Flashbacks
- Avoidance of memories, thoughts, feelings or external reminders (triggers) of the event
- Negative thoughts and mood:
  - Persistent anger or blame toward self or others
  - Withdrawal from others
  - Diminished interest in or motivation for normal activities
  - Inability to remember key aspects of the event
- Arousal:
  - Aggressive, reckless or self destructive behavior
  - Sleep disturbance
  - Hyper-vigilance

Again, it is important to note that only a mental health professional can diagnose PTSD. Some people may experience some or all of these symptoms, but not to a level or degree that would warrant a mental health diagnosis.



**If you are experiencing significant trauma-related symptoms, it is important that you seek counsel from a trained professional who can conduct an assessment and make recommendations for your journey to healing in a safe way.**

If, however, you still feel confident that you can continue this healing journey on your own, and are interested in self-directed strategies and tools to enhance your recovery, then read on. But first, take a few moments to answer the trauma reflection questions below.

## What is Trauma? Reflection Questions

Jot down a few thoughts, questions or concerns you have after reading about the fight or flight system, trauma, and post traumatic stress.

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Have you ever experienced post traumatic stress reactions? (Most people have). What did it feel like in your body? Which symptoms did you experience?

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Do you feel ready to work through this workbook without the help of a trained professional? Why or why not?

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If the workbook becomes too challenging or distressing who can you go to for help? (Friends, loved ones, clergy, mental health professionals, hotlines, etc). Make a list of supportive people or resources. If you're not sure about resources, call your EAP for ideas.

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## The Mind/Body Connection

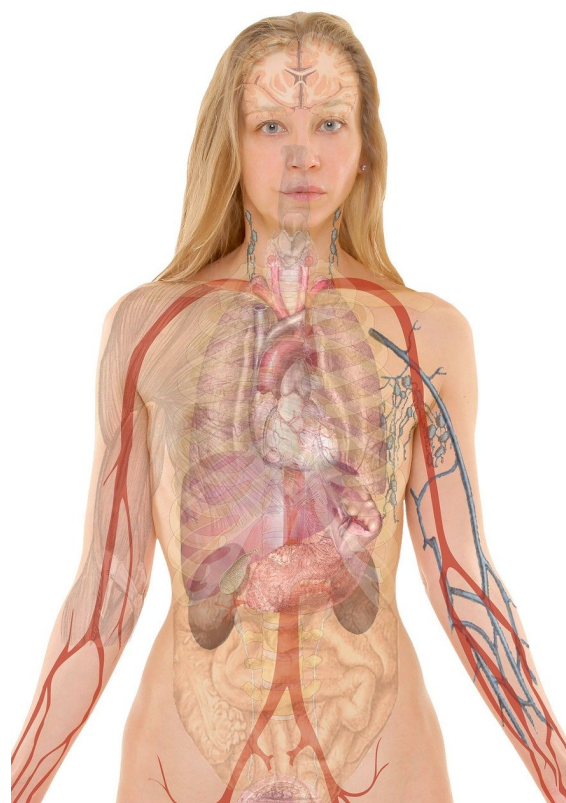
We already talked about the fight or flight system, (also known as the sympathetic nervous system, or stress response). I mentioned that you were going to learn some skills to de-escalate your fight or flight system after it's been activated, and learn some strategies to keep it from overreacting in the first place. These will prove to be crucial skills as you move forward in this workbook and start dealing with some challenging memories that will likely cause stress. Not to mention, they are crucial skills when dealing with stress of any kind. The first step to all of this is self awareness, especially as it relates to the mind/body connection.

### Self Awareness

As you know, the fight or flight system sets off a chemical reaction that causes all kinds of changes and sensations in your body, but when was the last time you actually noticed this process at work? For example, as I am working on this manual, my boss sent an email saying she needs it to be done sooner than I expected.

I felt my heart speed up and that familiar stress sensation throughout my body. But then I reminded myself that I'm diligent and competent, and though it's stressful, it's not a crisis. I took several long, deliberate breaths, dropped my shoulders and opened my chest, and over the course of just a few seconds I felt my heart rate slow and my body relax. Then I got back to work. That was my fight or flight system in action.

Think back to your day. Did anything stressful happen that may have triggered your fight or flight? Even just a small thing? If you can't think of anything today, how about sometime this week? This month? Consider the Self Awareness Reflection Questions below, and write your answers in your notebook or journal.



## Self Awareness Reflection Questions

**When was the last time you noticed your fight or flight system was activated?**

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**What was the "trigger" (situation, event, or thought that initiated this response)?**

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**What symptoms did you notice (racing heart, shallow/quick breath, muscle tension, butterflies in stomach, sweating/clammy skin, vivid senses, difficulty concentrating or remembering details, tingling, or any other sensations)?**

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It is so important to get into the habit of paying attention to yourself and your body's reactions. There are many strategies that can help you build self awareness skills.

## Grounding and Deep Breathing

Click on the link and try following along with this guided exercise on YouTube to practice grounding, deep breathing, and improve your mind/body connection: [Guided Grounding and Deep Breathing](#).

Also, check out the printable [Body Scan script in the Appendix B](#) of this workbook.

After you've practiced grounding and deep breathing or body scan, take a few moments to reflect on this experience using the grounding and deep breathing reflection questions below. Write your answers in your notebook or journal.

## Grounding and Deep Breathing Reflection Questions

What are your thoughts about the [Grounding and Deep Breathing](#) exercise? Were you able to create a sense of relaxation? Why or why not?

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Do you think this would be a valuable tool for you to practice regularly? Why or why not?

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How will you increase your mind/body connection skills? What strategies will you try? When will you practice? How often?

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On a scale of 0-10 (0 = Not likely, 10 = Extremely likely) how likely are you to follow through on your commitments above?

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Why did you choose the number you did? Why isn't it higher? Why isn't it lower?

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What could you do to increase your number by .5?

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## Emotional Awareness

Were you able to stick to your commitments and practice the skills to improve self awareness and your mind/body connection? If so, I would like to extend my congratulations. You're doing it!



(These people want to celebrate with you!)

### Emotions

As you guessed, this section is all about emotions, more commonly known as feelings. For example, the people in the photo above are probably feeling happy or excited based on their actions and facial expressions. Take a moment to reflect: How do you feel right now? Maybe proud if you did accomplish your goals from the last section, or disappointed if you didn't. In your notebook or journal, write your answers to the emotions reflection questions below.

## Emotions Reflection Questions

**How do I feel right now?**

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**How many feeling words can I come up with to describe my emotional state right now?**

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**If my feelings were a song, picture, shape or image, what would it look/sound/feel like?**

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**Think of a time in the last week when you felt something very strongly--either positively or negatively. Describe the scenario and the sensations you felt physically, mentally and emotionally.**

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## Emotions Vocabulary

In order to regulate emotions, it's important first that you have an adequate emotions vocabulary. Some people are limited to just a few words to describe their emotional state, "mad, sad, happy or scared." One client I worked with had only one feeling word: "irate!" I get it — there are times when you might feel irate, but there's so much more to it than that. Maybe you're scared, hurt, angry, frustrated, irritated or annoyed... you get the idea.

The first activity in this section is an exercise designed to increase your emotional vocabulary. **First, check out the [“Feelings Grid” page in Appendix C](#).** (You may want to print this page for easy reference while completing the next activity.) The feelings grid will help you think of feelings words — sometimes they are hard to come up with on your own.

Next, take a look at the pictures below and reflect on how they make you feel. Use your mind/body connection skills to notice any physical changes that the pictures may illicit — increased heart rate, butterflies in your stomach, lightness or heaviness, etc. Notice any thoughts, memories or associations you make to the picture.



Decide if the picture elicits negative or positive feelings, and if it incites high energy or low energy. Find the appropriate box on the Feelings Grid to start, and then choose at least two or three more emotions that describe how that picture makes you feel. Use the grid as a guide, and feel free to come up with some words of your own. Write them down in your notebook or journal.

Focus on the first picture, and after you have completed the question prompts for that picture, advance to the next.

Are you ready?

**Picture 1**

**Write down at least three emotions this picture elicits.**

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**Notice any physical sensations that the picture elicits in your body — write those down.**

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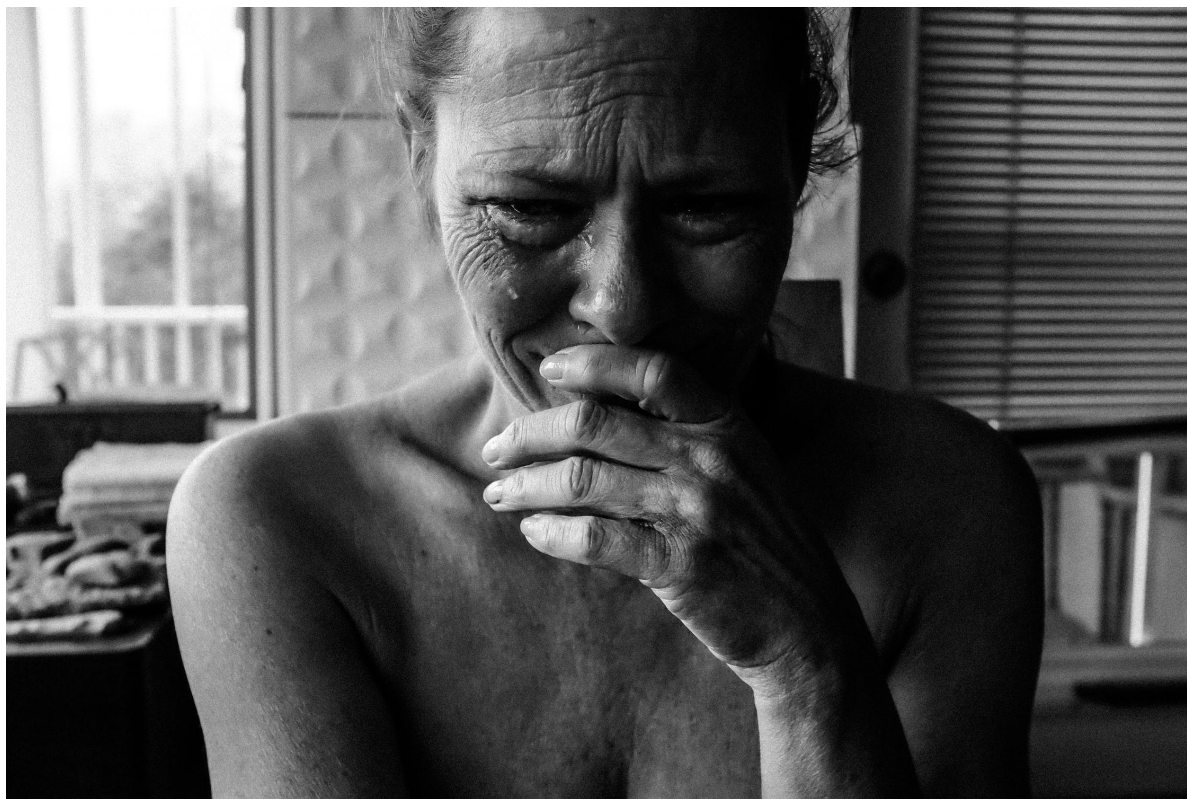
**Why does the picture affect you this way? Is it associated with memories, beliefs or experiences you have had? Jot some notes about why you think the picture affects you the way it does.**

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## Picture 2



Write down at least three emotions this picture elicits.

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Notice any physical sensations that the picture elicits in your body — write those down.

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Why does the picture affect you this way? Is it associated with memories, beliefs or experiences you have had? Jot some notes about why you think the picture affects you the way it does.

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### Picture 3



Write down at least three emotions this picture elicits.

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Notice any physical sensations that the picture elicits in your body — write those down.

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Why does the picture affect you this way? Is it associated with memories, beliefs or experiences you have had? Jot some notes about why you think the picture affects you the way it does.

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**Picture 4**



**Write down at least three emotions this picture elicits.**

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**Notice any physical sensations that the picture elicits in your body — write those down.**

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**Why does the picture affect you this way? Is it associated with memories, beliefs or experiences you have had? Jot some notes about why you think the picture affects you the way it does.**

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**Picture 5**

**Write down at least three emotions this picture elicits.**

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**Notice any physical sensations that the picture elicits in your body — write those down.**

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**Why does the picture affect you this way? Is it associated with memories, beliefs or experiences you have had? Jot some notes about why you think the picture affects you the way it does.**

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How did you do? **If you tried the activity, then you automatically passed!** There is no right or wrong answer, or right or wrong way to feel about anything.

It's really hard to control feelings — they come and go as they please. But research finds that when we can effectively name our feelings, we feel less stress and more in control of ourselves. Expanding your emotional vocabulary is an effective strategy in and of itself. There are, however, many strategies to manage feelings so we aren't powerless to their tempestuous nature, and you will probably find that some work better for you than others.

**This workbook offers many strategies. Consider them all and use those that are most effective for you.**



## Emotion Regulation

In the activity above, you found that just looking at a picture can change your emotions, and even your physical sensations. Those were just pictures! Real life is a lot more intense, multi-faceted and unpredictable than pictures. Emotions and sensations (and ultimately, your fight or flight system) could be triggered by anything at any moment. Everyone needs skills to manage those feelings and sensations so they don't get the best of us.

### Deep Breathing



If you practiced the Grounding and Deep Breathing or Body Scan activities in the Mind/Body Connection section, you've already practiced some deep breathing. Way to go! One way to make deep breathing an effective strategy to regulate your fight or flight system and kick in your rest & digest system is to belly breathe. When you inhale, focus on filling up an imaginary balloon in your belly so that your abdomen feels full and tight. Hold that breath for a few seconds, then feel the relaxation as you exhale. The reason why this is so effective is that pressure you create in your belly pushes on your vagus nerve, which sends signals to your brain to initiate the rest & digest response. The longer and deeper you breathe (remembering to fill your belly, not lift your shoulders) the more relaxed you will become.

## Belly Breath Activity

Try the Belly Breath Exercise below. Write your responses in your notebook or journal.

On a scale of 1-10, rate your level of stress or tension right now: \_\_\_\_\_

0= Very Calm

5 = Neutral

10 = Very agitated/distressed

Try belly breathing for at least 10 breath cycles. Don't forget to fill the imaginary balloon in your belly each time, and avoid lifting your shoulders.

Rate your level of relaxation again: \_\_\_\_\_

0= Very Calm

5 = Neutral

10 = Very agitated/distressed

Do you think this would be a helpful strategy to regulate difficult emotions? Why or why not?

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## Distraction

Another strategy that many people use is distraction. This is basically thinking about something other than the bothersome thought, situation or event that is eliciting negative emotions. Now, it's important to note that SOMETIMES you have to think about distressing things and be able to tolerate that, but other times using distraction is a perfectly healthy and effective strategy in managing your emotions.

Here are some distractions strategies you can try:

- Think of 3 of your favorite things. Hold those things in your mind to crowd out the distressing thoughts.
- Cultivate a different emotion by imagining a peaceful place, listening to an upbeat song, finding funny memes, or remembering a meaningful moment.
- Push the thoughts out of your mind by building an imaginary wall between yourself and the thoughts, or putting it in a mental box and locking the box up tight. Every time the thought comes back, put it behind the wall or lock it up again.
- Do something else: clean, cook, exercise, walk, call a friend, engage in a hobby, etc.



## Distraction Reflection Questions

**When do I already use distraction?**

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**What distraction strategies do I use?**

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**When I use distraction as a coping tool, is it effective? Why or why not?**

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**What other types of distraction strategies could I use?**

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**When would distraction tools be most helpful to me?**

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## Self Soothing

You already know that your mind and body are intricately connected, so another helpful strategy to manage emotions is called self soothing. Self soothing uses your five senses to create a calmer, more relaxed state of mind. Here are some self soothing strategies you might want to try:

### Touch:

- Hold ice cubes in your hand
- Take a hot (or cold) shower or bath
- Pet your pet
- Wrap yourself in a soft blanket
- Gently rub your arms or hands
- Brush your hair or your skin

### Sight:

- Look at pictures of family and friends
- Look at beautiful photos
- Keep toys or mementos around your workspace
- Buy or cut flowers
- Go outside or look out a window to enjoy nature (research finds that spending time in nature is a great way to decrease anxiety and improve mood)

### Smell

- Use your favorite perfume or lotion
- Try some essential oils — on your skin or in a diffuser
- Light a nice smelling candle
- Focus on the smell of your food, candy, gum, etc. before you eat it

### Taste

- Chew a piece of gum or candy. Savor the flavors
- Take a drink of water or some other beverage. Pay attention to the flavors and the temperature.

### Hear

- Listen to soothing music
- Listen to blaring music for a little while (if that helps you)
- Listen for subtle noises around you — a clock ticking, birds chirping, etc.
- Purchase a small water fountain or sound machine
- Tap out a methodical rhythm
- Hum or sing your favorite song

### Use your imagination

If you can't find lotion or soft blankets or music, imagine yourself in a peaceful, relaxing place. What do you see there? What does it smell like? Taste like? Sound like? The more details you can imagine, the more relaxed you will become.

Use the self soothing reflection questions below to consider how you can use self soothing to regulate your emotions.

## Self Soothing Reflection Questions

**In what ways do you already use your five senses to self soothe? Is it effective?**

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**When you use self soothing strategies, how effective is it?**

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**What other self soothing strategies could you use?**

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**In what situations do you think self soothing would be helpful?**

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## Distress Tolerance

Sometimes we have to face difficult or distressing emotions, and even though they cause fear, anger or agitation, it's important that we can tolerate even intense feelings and physical sensations without acting out in harmful or aggressive ways. Sometimes we need to just sit in discomfort without doing anything.

### Ice Cube Activity

For this activity you are going to need an ice cube and a 3-minute timer. Go get them right now — I'll wait....

- 1). Set the timer for three minutes.
- 2). Hold the ice cube in one hand for the entire three minutes.
- 3). It's going to hurt. Don't let go.

You're probably going to want to set it down or switch hands or something, but resist the urge. Just sit there and hold the ice cube. Focus on something else if you need to — maybe a part of your body that feels strong or relaxed. Count. Take deep breaths. Sing. Do whatever you need to do to get through this, but don't let go...



\*... 3 minutes goes by\*

**Time's up!**

Could you do it? If you did, then you can tolerate distress! Remember this the next time you feel agitated or upset and want to lash out or do something destructive. You can endure — you just proved it. Wait it out. The feelings will pass.

That was a tough one. Congratulations on making it through!

Jot some notes about this experience, and what you can learn from it by using the distress tolerance reflection prompts below.

## Distress Tolerance Reflection Questions

Could you hold the ice cube for the full 3 minutes? How did you accomplish that, or what stopped you?

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When you feel distress or agitation, what could you do to keep yourself calm and patiently endure?

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## Emotion Regulation Summary

We covered a lot in this section, so if your brain hurts a little, that's ok. Take a break!

Emotion regulation is an essential skill when dealing with distressing and traumatic memories, so it's important that you get at least a minimal mastery of these skills before moving on to the trauma narrative portion of this workbook.

The exercises offered in this book are not the only ones that work — there are so many that this workbook couldn't possibly cover them all. Take a few days, or even weeks if you need to, to practice the strategies in this workbook, or do some research of your own to find techniques that work for you. In your notebook or journal, make a commitment to yourself by completing the emotions summary reflection questions below.

**How will you increase your emotion regulation skills? What other research will you do, or strategies will you try?**

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**When will you practice emotion regulation skills? How often?**

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**On a scale of 0-10 (0 = Not likely, 10 = Extremely likely) how likely are you to follow through on your commitments above? Why?**

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**What could you do to increase your number by .5?**

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Once you feel at least somewhat confident in your ability to regulate your emotions, and to tolerate a moderate amount of distress, then you are ready to move forward and begin your trauma narrative.

## Separating Thoughts, Feelings and Facts

Write down why this woman's statement is incorrect:

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Check your answer at the end of this section.



In the next section you are going to start your trauma narrative, but there is one more thing we need to discuss first.

We talked a lot about the mind/body connection as well as emotions in previous sections, but we did not talk about the difference between thoughts, feelings and facts. The differences may seem obvious, but people get them confused all the time. It's going to be important that you have a clear understanding of the differences as you write your narrative, so just to make sure we're all on the same page with these terms, let's start with a quick primer on "Thoughts, Feelings and Facts."

### Thoughts

Thoughts are the statements your mind makes. They can be observations, interpretations or judgments about people, places or things. They can also be imaginations, new ideas or opinions. Here are a few examples of thoughts:

- "She's so pretty."
- "I'm hungry."
- "What if we could build a time machine and travel back to ancient times?"
- "Blah blah blah. This speaker is so boring."

You get the idea.

Thoughts often get confused with feelings. People often say they are feeling something, when in actuality they are thinking something. Here's a rule of thumb: If someone says "I feel that..." they are not talking about feelings at all, but rather thoughts. Here's an example:

- "I feel like I've gained weight." — In reality, you think you've gained weight.
  - (You might feel more sluggish, bloated or unmotivated.)
- "I feel that we should exercise more." — In reality, you think you should exercise more.

You get the idea. Thoughts come from your brain.

## Feelings

Feelings and emotions are the same thing. They can be described in one (rarely two) words, such as: disappointed, grumpy, excited, nervous, greedy, upset, lazy, obnoxious or startled. We talked a lot about this in the previous section, so I hope that by now you have a pretty extensive emotional vocabulary. Feelings are sometimes thought to come from our heart, but in actuality, they are formed and created from all parts of our body (as we learned in the mind/body connection section).

## Facts

A fact is a "thing that is known or proved to be true" (Google dictionary). They are neither thoughts nor feelings, but we will probably have both thoughts and feelings about facts. Examples of facts include:

- I own a Toyota Camry. (I can prove it. My name is on the title).
- Alaska is the largest state in the United States of America. (I haven't actually measured it, but this fact is widely known to be true.)
- You are reading this Trauma Narrative Workbook.

Facts are simply observations of the world around us (and inside of us).



## The Interplay Between Thoughts, Feelings and Facts

Something happens. It could be anything. This is the fact (sometimes known as the situation or event). We have thoughts (interpretations and judgments) about these facts. Our thoughts elicit feelings which triggers biochemical reactions and sensations inside our body.

Let's do a little exercise. I'm going to make a statement, and you decide if it's a fact, thought or feeling. Circle the correct answer, then check your answers at the end of this section. Ready?

<b>Danny hasn't brushed his teeth today.</b>	<b>Thought   Feeling   Fact</b>
<b>"My breath smells bad."</b>	<b>Thought   Feeling   Fact</b>
<b>*Embarrassed (because his breath stinks).</b>	<b>Thought   Feeling   Fact</b>
<b>"Maybe I should brush my teeth."</b>	<b>Thought   Feeling   Fact</b>
<b>Danny brushed his teeth.</b>	<b>Thought   Feeling   Fact</b>
<b>*Relieved (because his breath doesn't stink anymore).</b>	<b>Thought   Feeling   Fact</b>

How did you do? If you struggled with this a little bit, you may want to do a little more research on the difference between thoughts, feelings and facts. There are lots of worksheets and articles online that can help. If, however, you got the hang of it and you're ready to start your narrative, then let's get to it!

## Answer Key

### Why is the woman's statement incorrect?

A person cannot "feel" an opinion. She may be feeling challenged, irritated, curious, or angry, but she THINKS that the person is sharing an opinion.

### Thought, Feeling, Fact activity:

- |            |            |            |
|------------|------------|------------|
| 1. Fact    | 2. Thought | 3. Feeling |
| 4. Thought | 5. Fact    | 6. Feeling |

## Narrative Introduction

You are about to start your trauma narrative. But before you do, I want to remind you that it is essential that you have at least a minimal mastery of the previous sections — self awareness in mind/body connection as well as emotion regulation skills. If you don't think that you are able to recognize feelings, sensations, or fight or flight activation in your body yet, then please go back and review the "Self Awareness" page. If you aren't confident in your abilities to tolerate or manage difficult emotions, then please review the "Emotion Regulation" page. If you are ready, then let's get started.



A trauma narrative is just what it sounds like — a narrative (or story) of traumatic or upsetting events. This is a scientifically validated strategy in healing from past trauma or distressing events. We are going to work through your narrative in a step-by-step process called "gradual exposure" — we don't want to dive in with too much too soon. It's kind of like working your way into a cold swimming pool. First we'll put our feet in, and when that feels okay, then we'll go up to our knees, etc. Similar to that, you will start your narrative by writing about just the facts.

Once you have captured all the relevant facts for your narrative, and you feel relatively comfortable reviewing and rehearsing these facts without significant stress reactions (fight or flight), then you can move into the "thought" phase of the narrative, including interpretations and judgments. Then, when you are comfortable, you can move into feelings.

**This is a gradual process. Go at your own pace. If it gets too intense, take a break.**

To help you see how a narrative is crafted, I am going to create an example from a real situation: when my Game Boy was stolen in 6th grade. I'm choosing this example because 1) It's a true story that clearly has all the elements we want to include in a trauma narrative, and 2) There are no gnarly details or gruesome depictions because I don't want to cause you any additional distress by reading my story. I just want to give you a good example of how this narrative works.



There are many different ways to create your narrative. I will show you two different ways, but there are many more — the sky is the limit. If you start it one way and want to change, no problem. This is your narrative, and you can create it in whatever way is comfortable to you.

Before you dive right in to your most distressing memories, you may want to consider a "practice" narrative on something only moderately distressing. Not only will you get a chance to experience a narrative, but you can also rehearse your self awareness and emotion

regulation skills. You might feel better prepared and more confident to tackle the really hard memories if you have a little practice first.

Let's begin.



## Starting Your Narrative: Just the Facts

Before you begin, make sure you are in a quiet, safe place that is free from distractions.

There are many ways to craft your narrative. I will provide an example of both a timeline and paragraph format. Some people may choose to do illustrations or comic-book style depictions. There is no right or wrong way to do this. If you start it one way and want to change, no problem! This is your narrative and you can create it in any way that is comfortable to you. You may also want to title your narrative, similar to how you would title a book or story.

You will need to decide which event(s) you are going to focus on, and where to begin your narrative. For example, you probably won't need to go all the way back to your birth (but you might if that is relevant to your narrative). Most people start at the place right before events begin to happen. For example, "I was sitting on the couch watching tv when all of a sudden...." or "We were driving home from the grocery store when..." or "The first time I heard of coronavirus I was..." Begin in the place that makes the most sense to you.

Fill in just the facts of the event(s). Avoid any thoughts or feelings about events; stick to just the facts. You may find it difficult to refrain from writing down your thoughts and feelings about events, especially if your memories stir up deep emotions within you. Avoid that for now. It is important that for this draft that you only detail the facts.

### Formats

If you want to develop your narrative in a timeline format, draw a line or long "S curve" in your journal, on a large piece of paper, or in a drawing program on your computer. If you would rather do your narrative in paragraph form, (or art form, cartoon form, etc.) start with a clean sheet in whatever form you will be working on (paper or computer). Whichever format you use, make sure that you will have plenty of room to add in thoughts and feelings as you continue to work on your narrative.

As you are working through your narrative, if you start to feel emotional or upset, practice some of the mind/body connection exercises or emotion regulation exercises that you have previously learned. Do not force yourself to keep going if it becomes emotionally difficult to do so. Take your time to work through this at a pace and intensity level that is comfortable for you. At times you may feel challenged by the work, but you should not allow yourself to become overly distressed or agitated.

Before you begin, answer the starting your narrative reflection questions below.



## Starting Your Narrative Reflection Questions

As you began your trauma narrative, what emotions would describe how you feel?

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On a scale of 0-10 (0=completely relaxed and 10 = incredibly agitated) what is your comfort level about starting this narrative?

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What number will you need to be at in order to feel ready to begin? (Consider holding off on the narrative if your distress is higher than 5). What are some strategies that can help you get to a comfortable number (if you aren't already there)?

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## Fact Timeline Example

Christmas of 5th grade I got my Game Boy. It was yellow with blue buttons. It had a clear case with 5 games in it.

12-25-95

In 6th grade I brought my Game Boy (including games) to school in a dark blue, suede purse my mom gave me. I played it on the bus on the way to school. I showed several of my friends before school. I hung the blue suede purse under my jacket on the hook in the hallway. After school I put on my jacket and realized my purse was gone. I checked my backpack, my desk, my pockets--everywhere I could think of. It was totally gone. I had to leave or I would miss my bus. I got on the bus and went home without telling anyone about it.

Fall '96

Same Day

I told my mom about it when she got home from work that night. She pointed out that if I had told the teacher before everyone left for the day that she might have been able to search everyone's stuff and find it, but since everyone went home I would probably never get it back. She wasn't upset, but basically said, "Lesson learned."

Fall '96 and on

I never left valuable items unattended in the hallway at school after that.

## Fact Paragraph Example

### Case of the Stolen GameBoy

On Christmas of 1995, when I was in 5th grade, I got a Nintendo GameBoy from my parents for Christmas. It was yellow with blue buttons. It had a clear case with 5 games in it.

In fall of 1996, 6th grade, I brought my Game Boy (including games) to school in a dark blue, suede purse my mom gave me. I played it on the bus on the way to school. I showed several of my friends before school. I hung the blue suede purse under my jacket on the hook in the hallway.

After school I put on my jacket and realized my purse was gone. I checked my backpack, my desk, my pockets-- everywhere I could think of. It was totally gone. I had to leave or I would miss my bus. I got on the bus and went home without telling anyone about it.

I told my mom about it when she got home from work that night. She pointed out that if I had told the teacher before everyone left for the day that she might have been able to search everyone's stuff and find it, but since everyone went home I would probably never get it back. She wasn't upset, but basically said, "Lesson learned."

I never left valuable items unattended in the hallway at school after that.

Now it's your turn. Write down all the facts about the event(s) you are working on. When you are finished capturing all the facts of your narrative, take a few moments to reflect on your experience using the reflection questions below.

## Narrative Facts Reflection Questions

**Did you notice any feelings of distress or agitation? How did you calm down or work through them?**

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**On a scale of 0-10 (0=completely relaxed and 10 = incredibly agitated) how do you feel now?**

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**What number will you need to be at in order to feel comfortable about moving into the next phase of the narrative? What strategies will you use?**

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If you find that this part of the narrative was moderately to highly distressing, please do not continue until your distress level (as rated on a 0-10 scale) is back to a manageable number for you (at least less than 5, probably even lower).

If your distress is too high to continue right now, here is something to try: continue to read through the fact portion of your narrative, using mind/body connection skills, and emotion regulation strategies. Do this several times, and over the course of several days. Remember, this is a process of gradual exposure, so you should not move on until your "feet" are used to the water. The more times you go through your narrative practicing those relaxation skills, the easier and easier it should become. As you read through your narrative, you may realize that you remember more detailed facts about the event. It is totally fine to add them in as you remember them (just avoid writing down any thoughts or feelings yet).

When you feel relaxed and think that you are ready, you may move on to the next step. If you are finding it very difficult to regulate your distress, it might be a good idea to call your Employee Assistance Program or another mental health professional to help you complete your narrative journey.

## The Next Layer: Thoughts & Interpretations

Alright, you've made it this far. Good for you! Are you ready for the next step in your narrative? Before you begin, make sure you are in a quiet, safe place that is free from distractions.

For this step you are going to focus on just the thoughts around the events you wrote about in the "fact" phase. Try to remember what you were thinking at the time and not what you think about it now. (We will focus on your current thoughts and feelings in a different step.) Try to put yourself back in your shoes at the time of the incident(s). You might want to choose a different color for your thoughts than you chose for the facts (see the examples below).

Part of capturing your thoughts is also recognizing your interpretations. For example, the fact might be that the sky looks gray today. I might interpret this to mean that it's going to rain (thought) or I might



interpret that there is a lot of pollution in the air (thought). There is no prescribed way to think about anything. Two people experiencing the exact same situation will probably have very different thoughts and interpretations of the same event. That is ok! This exercise is not about forming the "right" thoughts about any particular idea, event or situation, but rather to become aware of how your brain was processing information at that time.

If you begin to feel agitated or overwhelmed, remember to practice your mind/body connection and emotion regulation skills to de-escalate your fight or flight system.

Before you begin, see the examples below, and then jot down your answers to the reflection questions.



## Thoughts & Interpretations Reflection Questions

As you began the thoughts and interpretations part of your trauma narrative, what emotions would describe how you feel?

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On a scale of 0-10 (0=completely relaxed and 10 = incredibly agitated) what is your comfort level about starting this narrative?

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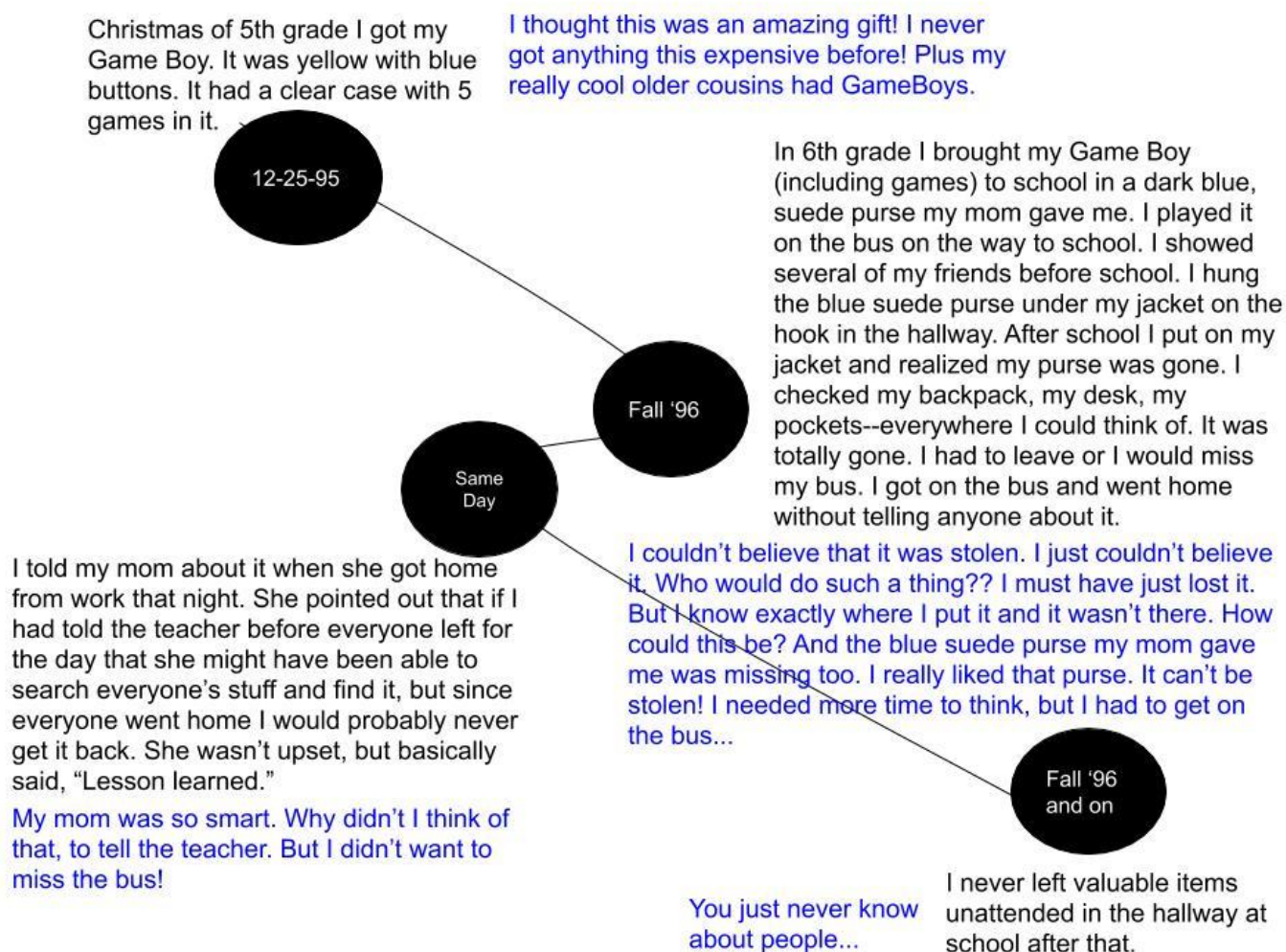
What number will you need to be at in order to feel ready to begin? What are some strategies that can help you get to that number (if you aren't already there)?

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## Timeline Thoughts & Interpretations Example



## Paragraph Thoughts & Interpretations Example

### Case of the Stolen GameBoy

On Christmas of 1995, when I was in 5th grade, I got a Nintendo GameBoy from my parents for Christmas. It was yellow with blue buttons. It had a clear case with 5 games in it. *I thought this was an amazing gift! I never got anything this expensive before! Plus my really cool older cousins had GameBoys.*

In fall of 1996, 6th grade, I brought my Game Boy (including games) to school in a dark blue, suede purse my mom gave me. I played it on the bus on the way to school. I showed several of my friends before school. I hung the blue suede purse under my jacket on the hook in the hallway.

After school I put on my jacket and realized my purse was gone. I checked my backpack, my desk, my pockets-- everywhere I could think of. It was totally gone. I had to leave or I would miss my bus. I got on the bus and went home without telling anyone about it.

*As this was happening I was thinking that I couldn't believe that it was stolen. I just couldn't believe it. Who would do such a thing??*

*I must have just lost it. But I knew exactly where I put it and it wasn't there. How could this be? And the blue suede purse my mom gave me was missing too. I really liked that purse. It can't be stolen!*

I told my mom about it when she got home from work that night. She pointed out that if I had told the teacher before everyone left for the day that she might have been able to search everyone's stuff and find it, but since everyone went home I would probably never get it back. She wasn't upset, but basically said, "Lesson learned."

*My mom was so smart. Why didn't I think of that, to tell the teacher. But I didn't want to miss the bus!*

I never left valuable items unattended in the hallway at school after that. *You just never know about people...*

Now it's your turn. Write down all the thoughts and interpretations you had about the event(s) you are working on. Remember to try to remember the thoughts you had then, and not what you think about it now. When you are finished capturing all the thoughts and interpretations of your narrative, take a few moments to reflect on your experience using the reflection questions below.

## Narrative Thoughts & Interpretations Reflection Questions

Did you notice feelings of distress or agitation? How did you calm down or work through them?

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On a scale of 0-10 (0=completely relaxed and 10 = incredibly agitated) how do you feel now?

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What number will you need to be at in order to feel comfortable about moving into the next phase of the narrative? What strategies will you use?

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## Next Step: Focus On Feelings

Way to go! You are doing it, and you're almost there! Are you ready for the next step in your narrative? Before you begin, make sure you are in a quiet, safe place that is free from distractions.



The next phase of the narrative is to add in your feelings (or emotions — same thing) about the events in your narrative. Remember, try not to hone in on how you feel now (we will work on that later), but rather how you felt then. Try to put yourself back in your shoes at the time the event(s) was happening. Remember, if you begin to feel agitated or overwhelmed, practice your mind/body connection and emotion regulation skills to de-escalate your fight or flight system.

Before you begin, see the examples below, and jot down your answers to the reflection questions below. (Revisit the feelings wheel from the Emotion Regulation page if you are stuck. Challenge yourself to use new words!)

### Feelings Reflection Questions

**As you began the feelings part of your trauma narrative, what emotions would describe how you feel?**

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**On a scale of 0-10 (0=completely relaxed and 10 = incredibly agitated) what is your comfort level about working on this part of the narrative?**

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**What number will you need to be at in order to feel ready to begin? What are some strategies that can help you get to that number (if you aren't already there)?**

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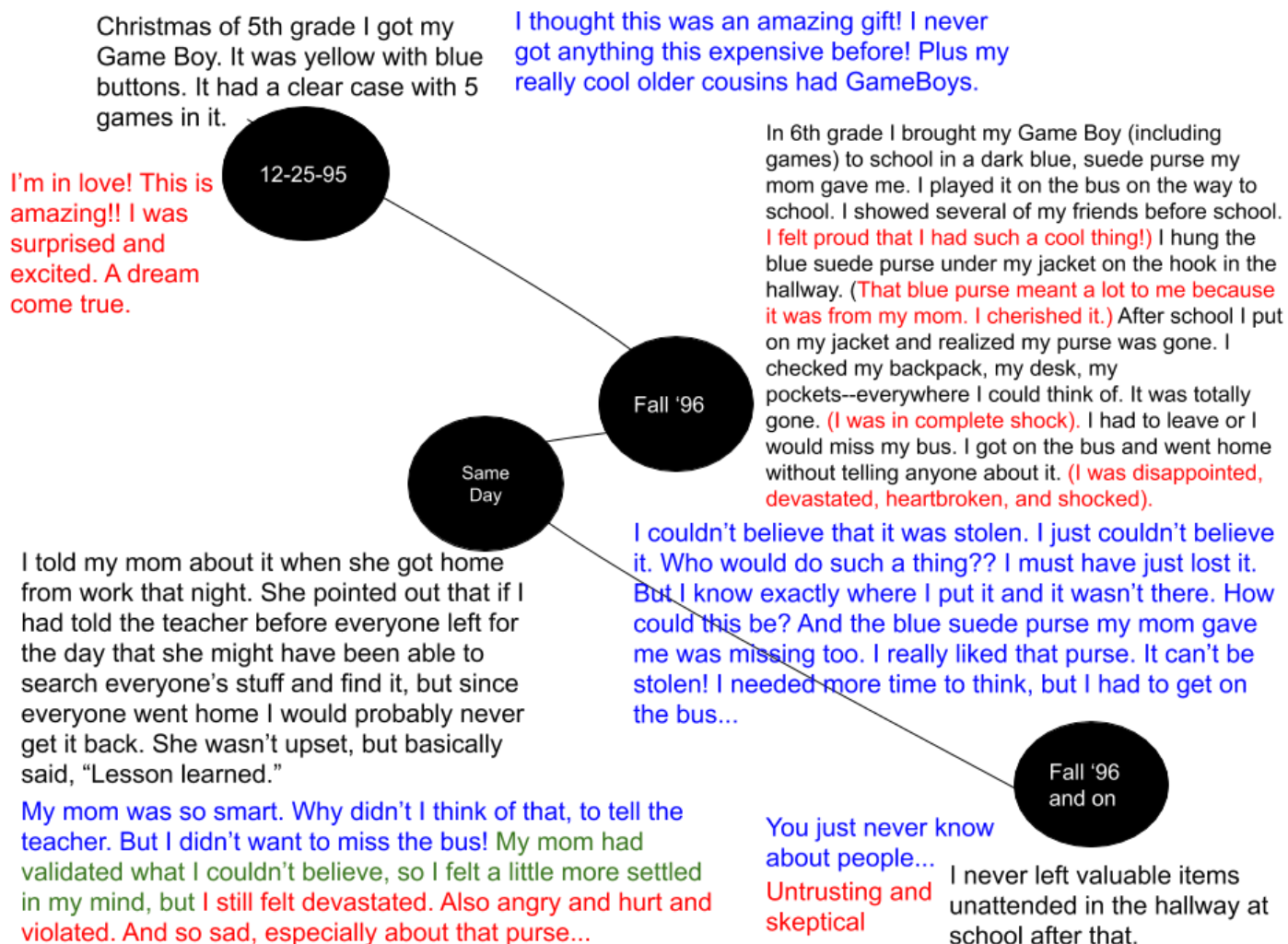


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## Timeline Feelings Example





## Paragraph Feelings Example

### Case of the Stolen GameBoy

On Christmas of 1995, when I was in 5th grade, I got a Nintendo GameBoy from my parents for Christmas. It was yellow with blue buttons. It had a clear case with 5 games in it. I thought this was an amazing gift! I never got anything this expensive before! Plus my really cool older cousins had GameBoys.

In fall of 1996, 6th grade, I brought my Game Boy (including games) to school in a dark blue, suede purse my mom gave me. I played it on the bus on the way to school. I showed several of my friends before school. I felt proud that I had such a cool thing! I hung the blue suede purse under my jacket on the hook in the hallway. That blue purse meant a lot to me because it was from my mom. I cherished it.)

After school I put on my jacket and realized my purse was gone. I checked my backpack, my desk, my pockets-- everywhere I could think of. It was totally gone. I was in complete shock! I had to leave or I would miss my bus. I got on the bus and went home without telling anyone about it.

As this was happening I was thinking that I couldn't believe that it was stolen. I just couldn't believe it. Who would do such a thing??

I must have just lost it. But I knew exactly where I put it and it wasn't there. How could this be? And the blue suede purse my mom gave me was missing too. I really liked that purse. It can't be stolen! I was disappointed, devastated, heartbroken, and shocked.

I told my mom about it when she got home from work that night. She pointed out that if I had told the teacher before everyone left for the day that she might have been able to search everyone's stuff and find it, but since everyone went home I would probably never get it back. She wasn't upset, but basically said, "Lesson learned."

My mom was so smart. Why didn't I think of that, to tell the teacher. But I didn't want to miss the bus! My mom had validated what I couldn't believe, so I felt a little more settled in my mind, but I still felt devastated. Also angry and hurt and violated. And so sad, especially about that purse. I loved the GameBoy, but I cherished the purse.

I never left valuable items unattended in the hallway at school after that. You just never know about people... From that point on I was more untrusting and skeptical about people I didn't know.

## Narrative Feelings Reflection Questions

Did you notice feelings of distress or agitation? How did you calm down or work through them?

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On a scale of 0-10 (0=completely relaxed and 10 = incredibly agitated) how do you feel now?

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What number will you need to be at in order to feel comfortable about moving into the next phase of the narrative? What strategies will you use?

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## Test Your Assumptions

Congratulations! You did it! Way to go!! I know that wasn't easy, but you stuck with it and finished. Good for you. Before you begin the next step, make sure you are in a quiet, safe place free from distractions.

### Change Your Thinking

At this point your narrative is complete, but it is not finished. This next step of the narrative, testing your assumptions, can be a little tricky, especially if you've never been trained in the technique of Socratic Questioning. (Don't worry, most people haven't. You may not even know what that is, and that's ok.)

In this step you are going to challenge some of the thoughts you had during the time of the events, and try to see things from a different perspective. As I said before, there are many different interpretations (or thoughts a person could have) about any single event, and some interpretations (or thoughts) are more helpful to us than others.

**This step is not about forming delusions about what really happened or pretending everything is all sunshine and rainbows. I'm sure it wasn't.**

This step is, however, about forming *accurate* and *helpful* interpretations of the events you have experienced, so that you can heal and move on.

Here is an example: A child is abused by a caregiver. They grow up thinking that the abuse was their fault. As an adult they identify the negative and unhelpful thought, and instead came up with alternative ways of thinking such as, "I was just a child; what my caregiver did was out of my control." "All children misbehave sometimes, but not all children are abused." "My caregiver was abused as a child and then perpetrated abuse on me. That is not my fault." Do you see how the thought "the abuse was my fault" was not accurate or helpful, but how challenging and changing those thoughts could facilitate healing?

**To begin, identify any thoughts you wrote in your narrative that are not both  
1) accurate and 2) helpful.**

Write them down on a separate sheet of paper or mark them so you can come back to them later.

Next, take a look at the ["Identify Negative Thoughts" handout in Appendix D](#) of this workbook.

Compare the negative thoughts on this page, with the thoughts you wrote on your narrative. Do any of them resonate with what you wrote? If so, those are the ones you may want to challenge first, as these thoughts are most assuredly not accurate and certainly not helpful. In fact, these thoughts are probably very harmful to you.

As you identify your negative thoughts with this first worksheet, challenge yourself to come up with new (helpful and accurate) thoughts to replace them with. Write those down in the next column of the worksheet, and add these new thoughts to your narrative. (You can either cross out your old, unhelpful thoughts and write over them, or, you may want to add in your new thoughts. For example, you could say something like, "I used to think I was unlovable, but now I realize that there are many people who love me, and I am deserving of love.")

If you are struggling to come up with accurate and helpful thoughts to replace negative thinking with, here are a few strategies to help:

## Thought Challenge

Refer to the ["Thought Challenge" page in Appendix E](#) to see if your negative thought holds up under a series of challenging questions. You can re-use this worksheet with every negative thought that must be challenged.

## Responsibility Pie

Many people who go through traumatic or distressing events often feel overly responsible for terrible events that happened — as if it was all or mostly all their fault. This is usually not true. To challenge this thought, imagine the entire crisis as a piece of pie, and every factor, event, or person that contributed to the outcome gets a slice of that responsibility pie. To start, list absolutely every person, thing or event that contributed to the trauma. Then designate a percentage of the pie to each, based on their level of responsibility. See the example below:

A 7-year-old girl wandered over to the neighbor's yard and got bit by their dog. The dog needed to be euthanized (put to sleep). The girl felt like it was all her fault. Was it really ALL her fault?

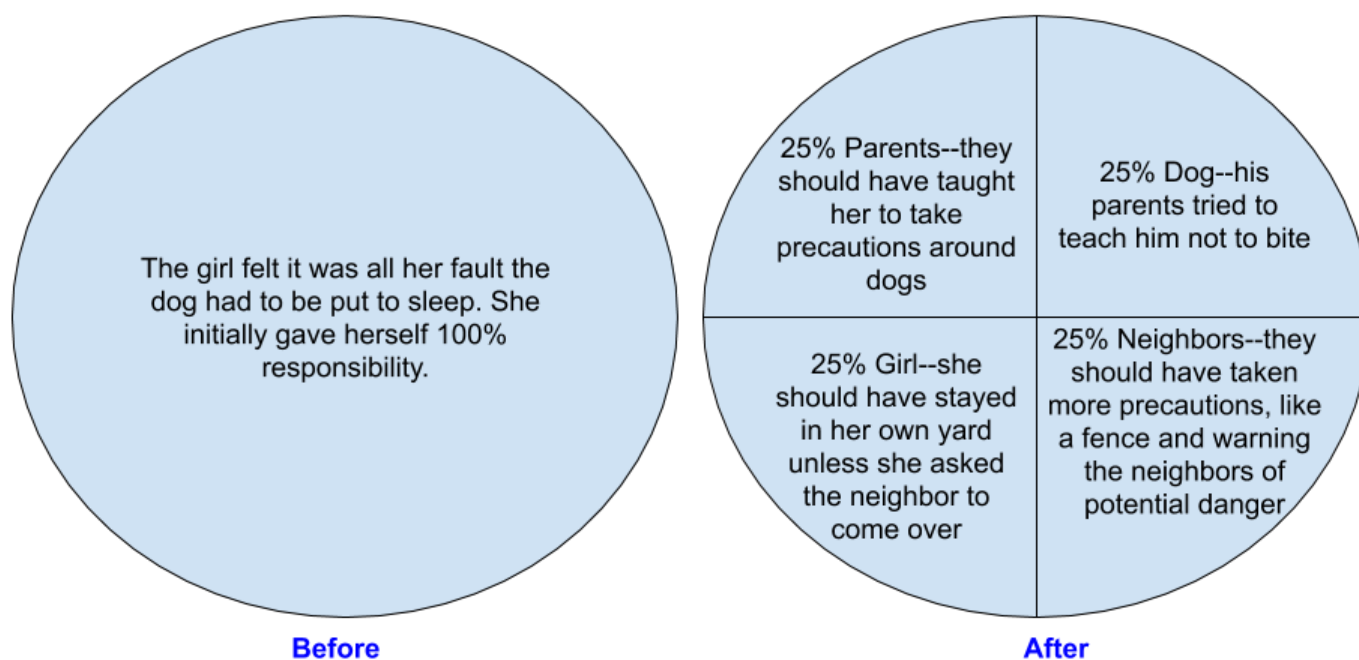
Involved people, situations and events:

**-The 7-year-old-girl:** She was playing outside unsupervised, and went to pet the neighbor's dog.

**-Her parents:** They were home, but had told her to go outside and play. They never minded if she played with the neighborhood dogs--there was never any problems.

**-The dog:** A protective breed with a history of nipping at children. He never left more than a scratch at most.

**-The dog owners:** They socialized their dog well, but was aware he was protective of their family. They intended to put up a fence, but couldn't afford one right now.



As you can see, the girl didn't abdicate her responsibility completely, but she relegated it to a more accurate and helpful depiction of the event. Regardless of the choices she made, it was not *all* her fault. Neither was it all her parents' fault (who also blamed themselves) or the neighbors (who also blamed themselves.) Everyone shared in the responsibility.

Now, there's no way to tell objectively how much responsibility each person actually gets. This is just a subjective exercise to put things into a better (more accurate and helpful) perspective. The parents may give themselves 50% responsibility and the neighbors 50%, relegating nothing to the child or the dog. That's fine. There's no right or wrong answer. The point is that it is rarely, if ever, entirely one person's fault.

## Rehearsal

Hopefully now you have identified negative thinking in your trauma narrative and have been able to replace those negative thoughts with ones that are more helpful and accurate. Now that you have done so,

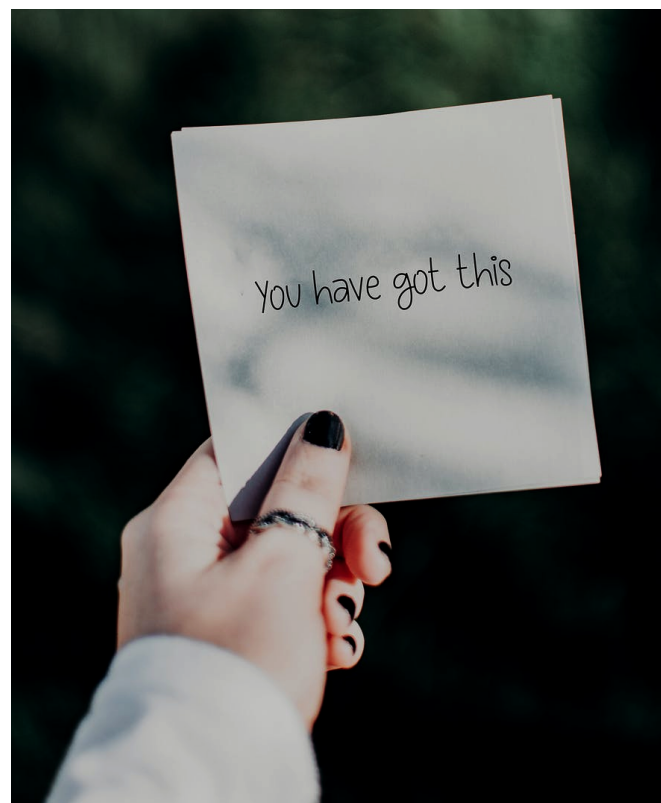
**it is important that you rehearse these new thoughts over and over.**

(You probably have rehearsed the negative ones a few thousand times, right?) In order to start feeling differently, you have to think differently, and it takes a while (sometimes a long time) to make these accurate, helpful thoughts your habit instead of the old way of thinking. Don't give up!

Write these new thoughts down and integrate them into your narrative (you are changing the outcome of your story as you do this!). Write them in your journal and say them everyday. Rehearse them before bed. Write them on your bathroom mirror and say them to yourself as you get ready for the day. Make up a song and sing them to yourself in the shower. There's no limit to your creativity, and no stopping you when you believe true and helpful things.

After you've practiced your new thinking for a while, you may be ready to move on to the next and final step in your trauma narrative journey, Resilience and Growth. Are you ready?

**Take some time to reflect on this process by writing your answers to the reflection questions below.**





## Test Your Assumptions Reflection Questions

Did you notice feelings of distress or agitation as you challenged your inaccurate or unhelpful thinking? How did you calm down or work through them?

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On a scale of 0-10 (0=completely relaxed and 10 = incredibly agitated) how do you feel now? What is contributing to your number?

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How will you continue to rehearse your new (accurate and helpful) thoughts? What specific strategies will you use?

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## Resilience & Growth

### Crossing the Finish Line

Congratulations! You've come so far! And you never gave up. Way to go! I'm so proud of you!! Alright, you are on the last page of this workbook, and hopefully it will be the easiest. The resilience and growth section is all about giving yourself credit for how far you've come. So first, let's review:

#### What is Trauma

We talked about the fight or flight system and post traumatic stress reactions — a normal response to abnormal events.

#### Self Awareness

The mind/body connection is crucial to recognizing when your fight or flight system is kicking in, and practicing relaxation strategies to de-escalate this response and induce relaxation. This was a cornerstone skill necessary for the difficult work ahead of you as you created your trauma narrative.

#### Emotion Regulation

More skills to help you de-escalate your fight or flight response and keep your emotions from getting too intense.

#### Thoughts, Feelings and Facts

A quick skill-building page to make sure we were clear on the differences between the three. These were really important to differentiate as we moved into the narrative process.

#### Narrative: Just the Facts

The first step in your trauma narrative — just capturing the facts. No thoughts or feelings allowed! You paid close attention to your emotional state and practiced regulation strategies to keep the intensity level at a manageable level.

#### Narrative: Thoughts

The second step in your narrative — thoughts (or interpretations) of the events as they unfolded.

#### Narrative: Feelings

Thoughts lead to feelings. Here you identified how the situations and events made you feel. (Tough work! But you did a great job of practicing your regulation skills, and you got through it!)

#### Test Your Assumptions (Challenging Thoughts)

Just because we think something doesn't make it true. Here you challenged your inaccurate, unhelpful thoughts and replaced them with more accurate, helpful thinking. As you did this, you changed the course of your narrative and probably your life!

### Resilience and Growth

Here is where you reflect on what you have learned. How have you grown? What character traits and skills have you developed? How have you demonstrated resilience? Who can you count on? How has your perspective changed? How are you different from the old you, and how do you think you will be different in the future?

Your narrative doesn't have to be done. You are still writing your story, and you are writing it every day. Complete your narrative by reflecting on the questions above. **Write your final chapter in any format that is comfortable to you.**

I want to thank you for taking this journey and congratulate you for all you have done! You are amazing! Keep fighting the good fight. I'm so proud of you!

To conclude, **write your answers to your last reflection questions below.**  
Here's to you!

### Growth & Resilience Reflection Questions

As you think back to all the difficult work you've done, what words describe how you feel?

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Do you have any questions or concerns that were not addressed in this workbook? If so, where can you go for additional help or support?

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What have you learned about healing from trauma? What skills and strategies will you continue to use throughout your life?

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## Appendix A: Fight or Flight

Most people have heard the term “fight or flight,” but many people aren’t really sure what that really means. **The “fight or flight” response is the way that your body works to keep you safe in dangerous situations.** This response, also known as the “stress response,” or more technically, the “sympathetic nervous system” includes physical, mental and emotional reactions. When the fight or flight response is turned on, your body releases biochemicals like adrenaline and cortisol to help you deal with danger. Here are some symptoms you may experience while your body is in fight or flight:

- Increased heart rate
- Fast, shallow breathing
- Muscle tension
- Pupil dilation
- Decreased digestion--nausea, low appetite
- Decreased immune function
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering details
- Increased sensory perception
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Urge to fight, flee, or feeling frozen in place

**Which of these symptoms do you experience?**



The fight or flight response is crucial in dangerous or life-threatening situations, but sometimes it overreacts and kicks in even when we are not in danger. For example, if you hear something tragic on the news, you realize money is missing from your wallet, or your neighbor gives you a mean look--though these situations may be stressful, none of them are dangerous.

**When was the last time you noticed that your stress response was activated?  
Was the situation truly dangerous, or just stressful? How did you respond?**

People who have experienced severe or chronic stress may have an overactive fight or flight system that reacts to almost everything! Over time this will take a toll, as chronic stress leads to many physical and mental health problems. The good news is that you can learn to de-escalate your fight or flight system, and improve coping skills to better regulate these reactions!

## Parasympathetic Response

The opposite of the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) response is the parasympathetic nervous system, also called the “rest and digest” response. The rest and digest response releases neurotransmitters like acetylcholine, epinephrine and norepinephrine throughout your body. When released, these biochemicals turn on your body’s relaxation response so that muscles relax, heart rate slows down, breathing returns to normal, and you can think clearly again. It is important for our physical and mental health to be in this regulated state most of the time.

**Do you think you might have an overactive fight or flight response, or are you able to stay emotionally and physically regulated most of the time? Think of some examples.**

Your behaviors and thinking can either enhance your body’s natural relaxation response, or keep it from operating at its best. Practicing relaxation skills regularly can help decrease your fight or flight responses. Learning to relax your body, through breathing and relaxation exercises as well as by minimizing stressful thinking, can help your body’s natural relaxation system be more effective.

**Do you have effective breathing and relaxation techniques that help you maintain a rest & digest state, even when circumstances are stressful? What strategies work best for you?**



[Go back to the Fight or Flight page in the workbook.](#)

## Appendix B: Body Scan

**Try this body scan technique to build your self awareness skills. Practice each part as you read through the script. After running through this exercise several times you will not need the script anymore, and will be able to practice body scan anytime, anywhere.**

Move into a comfortable position, either sitting or lying down.

Let your body go limp. Let your legs and arms be supported by the ground or the chair.



Take a deep breath in, filling your lungs and expanding your belly. Feel it enter through your nose or mouth, move through your airways, and fill your lungs and belly. Then feel it moving out of your body as you exhale and squeeze your belly button back towards your spine.

Continue to focus on this process through several breaths.

Now bring your attention to your toes. Wiggle your toes and notice how that feels. Do you have any tension or discomfort in your feet, or do they feel good and relaxed? Squeeze all the muscles in your feet and crunch them up as tight as you can. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Now drop the tension and let them relax. How does that feel?

Continue to take slow, deep, belly breaths.

Draw your attention to your calves. How do they feel? Tighten your calf muscles as hard as you can. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Now drop the tension and let them relax. How does that feel?

Next, notice your thighs. Tense your thigh muscles as tight as you can. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Now drop the tension and let them relax. How does that feel?

Continue to take slow, deep belly breaths.

Now bring your attention to your lower back. Notice any pain or tightness there. Notice any places that feel strong or relaxed. Breathe deeply through this area and let the muscles relax. Now tighten your lower back and seat muscles as hard as you can. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Now drop the tension and let them relax. How does that feel?

Move your focus on to your stomach. Pay attention to its movement as you breathe in and out, expanding that belly like a balloon on the inhale, and squeezing the air out by pulling your belly button towards your spine on the exhale. Stay with this movement for several breaths. Now tense your



abdomen muscles as tight as you can. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Now drop the tension and let them relax. How does that feel?

Bring your attention to your chest and shoulders. Notice any tension there and relax around it. Pull your chest open wide and drop your shoulders down. Notice how the tension builds as you take deep breaths in, and how relaxation sets in as you breathe out. Continue to breathe deeply, and allow yourself to relax just a little more with each breath.

Bring your attention to your neck. Roll your head gently from side to side and relax your muscles. Notice any tension, and release it. Now tense your neck muscles as tight as you can. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Now drop the tension and let it relax. How does that feel?

Now notice your face. Drop any tension in your facial muscles and let it go as you continue to breathe. Tense your entire face, squeezing it as tight as you can. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Now drop the tension and relax. How does that feel?

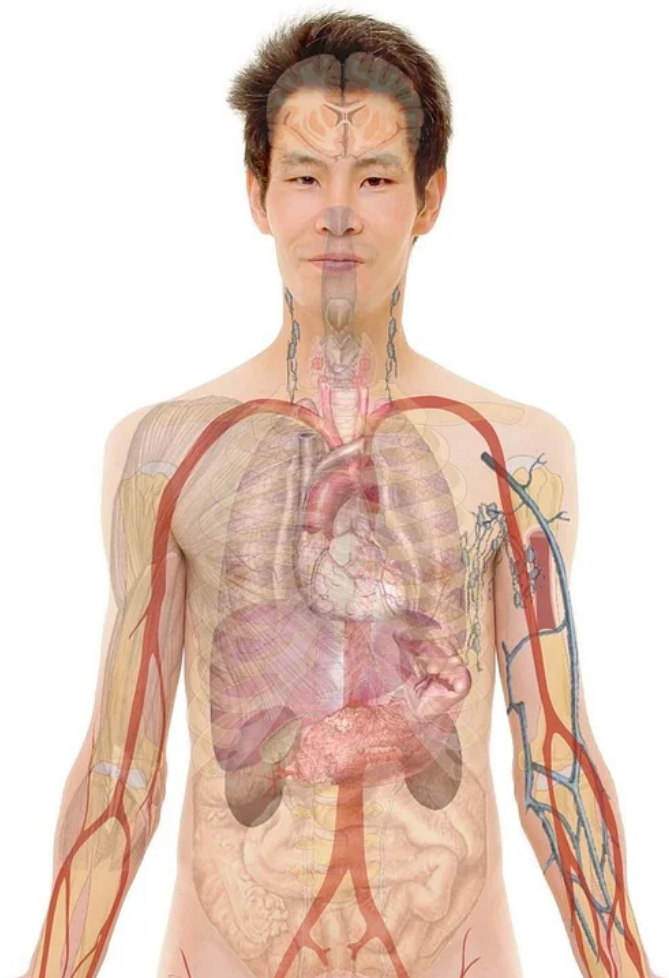
Bring your attention to the top of your head. Relax your muscles and let go of the tension. Notice how good it feels to let go.

Continue breathing and take some time to release all of your body's tension. Just let it go, and keep breathing.

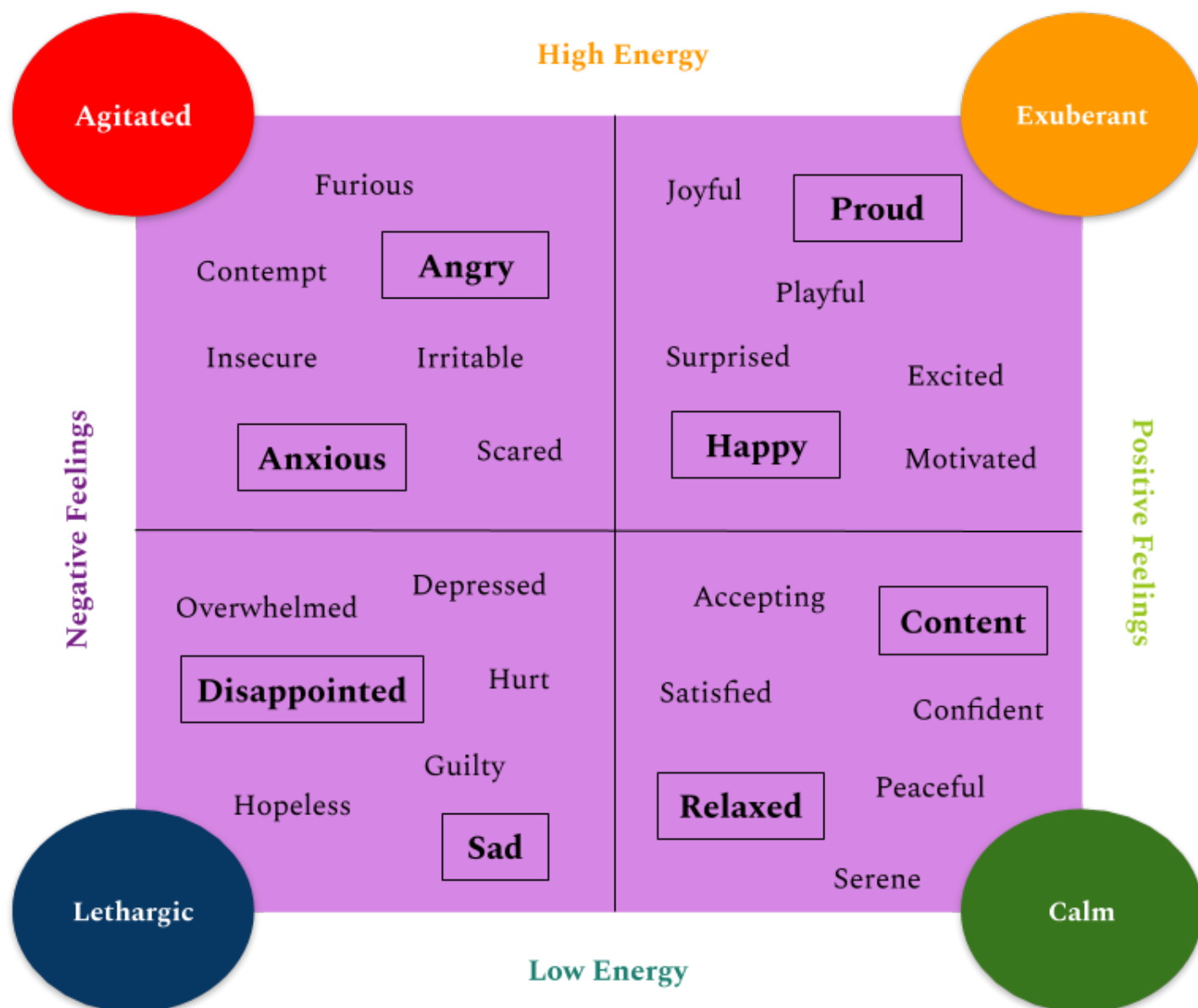
Now stand up, or feel your feet connected to the earth. Notice the pressure on the soles of your feet. Press down and notice the tension traveling through your feet, and into your legs and back. Hold that pressure. Notice that tension. Now release. How does that feel?

Notice your relaxed state and carry it with you for the rest of your day.

**[Go back to the Grounding and Deep Breathing page in this workbook.](#)**



## Appendix C: Feelings Grid



[Go back to the Emotions Vocabulary page in this workbook.](#)



## Appendix E: Thought Challenge

Because our thoughts impact how we feel, how we behave, and even how we regard ourselves and our relationships with others and the world, it is very important that our thoughts are accurate and helpful. It is critical to our wellbeing that we challenge any thoughts that cause us harm. Consider each of the prompts below. Write your responses in the space provided, and take time to elaborate and explain each of your answers.

Thought to be questioned:

Facts and feelings this thought is based on:

Evidence for this thought:

Evidence against this thought:

Am I misinterpreting evidence or making assumptions?

What facts, information or evidence have I ignored or discredited?

What interpretations might other people make of the same situation?

Could my thought be an exaggeration of what's actually true?

Where did this thought come from? If someone passed it on to me, are they a reliable source?

Is my thought a worst case scenario, or a likely scenario?

What is a more helpful thought to replace the old thought with?

[Go back to the Thought Challenge page in this workbook.](#)

## Ascension WI EAP

800-540-3758

[eap@ascension.org](mailto:eap@ascension.org)

[AscensionWIEAP.org](http://AscensionWIEAP.org)

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