

Most adults have at least a few memories that are downright painful. On the lighter end, there are those embarrassing experiences that cause you to cringe, even decades later. Then, there's heavier stuff, like heartbreak, loss, and regret. These memories are more than a series of facts and images — they also carry powerful emotions that feel like a punch to the gut every time they surface. In the case of trauma, this phenomenon is taken to the extreme. Traumatic memories are so emotionally loaded that even the smallest of reminders can be crippling. The sound of a car horn might trigger a panic attack, or a familiar smell can lead to an uncontrollable rage. Naturally, many survivors of trauma do their best to avoid these memories — who would willingly expose themselves to even more pain? Unfortunately, avoidance of trauma can sometimes be more harmful than it is helpful. Avoidance can cause trauma can become more painful, and some triggers are simply impossible to avoid. One way that therapists help survivors of trauma is through exposure treatments. During exposure, a client will be confronted with reminders of their trauma gradually, in a safe environment. With enough exposure, memories of trauma lose their emotional power. In this guide, we'll be exploring a single exposure technique called the trauma narrative. The trauma narrative is a powerful technique that allows survivors of trauma to confront and overcome their painful memories through storytelling.

What is a Trauma Narrative?

The trauma narrative is a psychological technique used to help survivors of trauma make sense of their experiences, while also acting as a form of exposure to painful memories. Without treatment, the memories of a trauma can feel like a jumbled mess — an unbearable wash of images, sounds, and emotions. When completing a trauma narrative, the story of a traumatic experience will be told repeatedly through verbal, written, or artistic means. Sharing and expanding upon a trauma narrative allows the individual to organize their memories, making them more manageable, and diminishing the painful emotions they carry. Trauma stories are often shared organically through conversation, both in and out of treatment. Sometimes, the organic retelling of a traumatic experience can be disruptive, especially if it's in an inappropriate setting (e.g. work or school).

Trauma is a normal reaction to many experiences, and the way each person handles it is unique. Avoiding reminders of a trauma might feel good in the moment, but it will cause symptoms to be worse when they do arise. After enough exposure to traumatic memories, their potency will diminish. It's normal to feel uncomfortable when discussing trauma. As you tell your story, it's important to remember you will never be in danger, and if it feels too bad, you can always stop.

Creating the Narrative

- **Start with the Facts.** Your first retelling of their trauma story should focus on the facts of what happened: the who, what, when, and where of your traumatic experience. Thoughts and feelings will come in later. Trauma narratives are most effective when they're written. If the facts are too difficult to get out, break things down further; write separate entries about what happened before, during, and after the trauma.
- **Adding Thoughts and Feelings.** After writing about the facts of a trauma, it's time to revise and add more detail. Slowly read through the narrative, adding information about the thoughts and feelings you experienced during the trauma. Revisions to the facts are also acceptable during this part of the process. Don't worry about digging down too deep in any one area— that'll come next.
- **Digging Deeper.** As you become more comfortable telling your story, you'll begin to focus on the more uncomfortable parts of your experience. Identify your worst memory, or the worst moments, of the trauma. Dig deeper in this area by adding as much detail as possible to the narrative. If this section is difficult, it's okay to move slowly. Spend time reviewing what has already been written, and allow more details to be added gradually. Try thinking about each of your senses, and what you were thinking and feeling during the worst moments of the trauma.
- **Wrapping Up.** Now that your narrative has been read and re-read in detail, and it has become somewhat easier to discuss, cognitive skills can be used. Review the story once again, this time challenging any irrational thoughts. Revise any sections as you see fit, and fill in any gaps in your story to attain a sense of completion. Finally, write one last paragraph about how you feel differently now, as opposed to when the trauma was occurring. What have you learned? Have you grown stronger in any ways? What would

you say to someone else who was going through the same experience? In some cases, you may have experienced multiple traumatic incidents, such as in a long abusive relationship, or exposure to war over many months. You get to decide what's included in your trauma narrative, and what isn't. Instead of a single trauma narrative, some might choose to write a "life narrative", or something closer to a timeline of incidents. Another option is to create a timeline as an overarching guideline, and then honing in on one particular experience.

Example Trauma Narrative

- **First Draft: The Facts.** It was a Sunday morning and I was planning on visiting my family. Before that I ate breakfast and went to the gym, like I always do on Sunday mornings. I talked to my mom on the phone, then left the house at about 10:30 AM to drive across town to my parents' house. Around 11 AM I was driving down Roosevelt Boulevard when a gold car turned right in front of me. I slammed on my brakes, but couldn't stop in time. I hit their passenger side door. My car flipped, and I think the other person's car was all smashed up. I was stuck in the car for a long time. I could hardly move, and I remember glass was everywhere. My body was numb. When help arrived they ripped open the car and pulled me out. Everything is a blur, but there were flashing lights and people watching. After I got out of the car they took me to the hospital in an ambulance. I could hear loud sirens the whole way, but I can't remember much else about the ambulance ride. The doctors told me I blacked out. I ended up staying in the hospital for a long time, a few weeks. I had a bunch of broken bones, and I had lost a lot of blood.
- **Second Draft: Thoughts and Feelings.** It was a Sunday morning and I was planning on visiting my parents. I was in a good mood because I had just finished my finals at my university the day before, and new classes weren't starting for 3 weeks. Before leaving I ate breakfast and went to the gym, like I always do on Sunday mornings. I talked to my mom on the phone, then left the house at about 10:30 AM to drive across town to my parent's house. Around 11 AM I was driving down Roosevelt Boulevard when a gold car turned right in front of me. I remember my heart skipping a beat and my whole body locking up. I didn't have time to think, I just slammed my brakes. I couldn't stop in time,

and I hit their passenger side door. My car flipped, and I think the other person's car was all smashed up. I was stuck in the car for a long time. I was so scared, I thought I was going to die. For a little while, I actually thought I was dead. I could hardly move, and I remember glass was everywhere. My body was numb, and I was struggling just to breathe. I could see my own blood. When help arrived they ripped open my car and pulled me out. I remember how bright it was outside. Everything was a blur, but there were flashing lights from a firetruck, and people were watching. They put me on a stretcher and rushed me into an ambulance. I can't remember much else about the ambulance ride. The doctors told me I blacked out. I ended up staying in the hospital for a long time—a few weeks. I had a bunch of broken bones, and I had lost a lot of blood. For a long time I still thought I would die. After I got a little bit better, I still thought I could lose my legs. They told me it would take a long time before I would be able to walk again, and I thought "I'll never be able to live a normal life". I was so scared for such a long time. Now I'm getting better—I'm going to physical therapy to rebuild the strength in my legs. I'm still very afraid of cars, even if I just think about them. When I think back to my accident I feel like I'm starting to have a panic attack, so I try to think of something else. I can't imagine ever being comfortable in a car again, let alone driving myself.

- Final Draft. Note: In the final draft, most changes will be made to the "worst moment" of the trauma, and the closing paragraphs. In this excerpt, we'll focus on those areas. The Worst Moments. I was stuck in the car for a long time... maybe 30 minutes. This was the worst part of the whole experience. I was so scared, I thought I was going to die. For a little while, I actually thought I was dead. I could hardly move, and I remember glass was everywhere. I had never felt so alone and helpless. I kept thinking about my family, and how they were still waiting for me to arrive. What would they think when I didn't show up? My body was numb, and I was struggling just to breathe. I could see my own blood. When help arrived they ripped open my car and pulled me out. I kept thinking the EMTs were grimacing when they looked at me, but now I don't know if they really were. They might have have just been concentrating on trying to help me. Next, I remember how bright it was outside. Everything was a blur, but there were flashing lights from a firetruck, and people were watching. I was wondering if my parents were there, were they watching? I was thinking about how the accident was probably my fault, and people

would be mad at me. The EMTs took me straight to an ambulance, which made me think something must be really wrong, because they were in such a rush.

- The Closing Paragraph. Now I'm getting better — I'm going to physical therapy to rebuild the strength in my legs. I'm still very afraid of cars, but I believe I can get better. Now I'm able to tell my story without having a panic attack, and Content Other Follow Share next I want to start working on getting back into a car. I realize that I was so scared I was going to die, but now I've made it. Even though my fear was so real, it's in the past now, and it can't hurt me. I want to focus on moving forward.