

## CHAPTER 5

# Building Strength

**T**rauma can shatter a person's belief system. An unthinkable tragedy can upset your most strongly held beliefs about how the world is supposed to be. Your views about personal safety and the safety of loved ones may be turned upside down. Your beliefs about fairness may be crushed, so questions like *Why me?* become all-consuming. We've discussed how this is normal and common for many trauma survivors. Feeling vulnerable is also common in the aftermath of trauma. You may question your own personal strength, particularly your ability to handle what's happened. This chapter focuses on how it takes a great deal of strength to navigate trauma and its aftermath. The central paradox to this aspect of posttraumatic growth is that recognizing your own vulnerability is key to being strong after trauma. As you learn to appreciate your own strength, you will also see how it can provide resilience in the face of future misfortune.

### Building Strength Takes Time

Many trauma survivors question why they have not bounced back within the days, months, or even years following a tragedy. For many, this questioning leads to negative and destructive feelings like shame, guilt, and despair. The reality is that everyone navigates the aftermath of trauma differently. There is no universal timeline for growth. It happens for some more quickly than for others. And we are not all that great at predicting who will respond more quickly.

What we can say with a considerable degree of confidence is that people tend to recognize their own personal strength only after some time has passed following the trauma. It is not immediate, but in most cases it does occur. Why does this take time? Trauma typically leaves people feeling weak and confused, and it takes time to get past these feelings. This is understandable. Until something happens that causes us to

rethink our core beliefs about the world and ourselves, most of us move through life assuming that these beliefs will never be shaken. We possess varying degrees of confidence in ourselves, which have been created over years of winning many victories like graduating from school, finding a mate, or landing a job. When this confidence is shaken by the death of a loved one, sexual assault, or a near deadly car crash, we are knocked back on our heels. We begin to question those things that we thought we knew about ourselves. Thoughts such as *Maybe I'm not so tough after all* and *I am weak and helpless in this dangerous world* invade our thoughts.

However, this questioning of your strength should not be confused with weakness or your inability to overcome hardship. It should be viewed as a temporary diversion. You've been blindsided and hit hard. You've been knocked off your path, and you're temporarily dazed and confused. No, this is not permanent. It's part of the healing and growth process. This process is best seen in the story of a soldier Bret worked with while in Iraq:

"Before that stray rocket landed in our camp, and Eric was killed and I was injured, I thought I was invincible. I was such a good soldier. I was fast and strong. I pulled guys out of burning trucks and killed enemies who were within seconds of killing me and my buddies. For months after the incident, I felt so weak. I felt so helpless. It was the first time in my life that I felt vulnerable. I hated that feeling. My commander pulling me from missions didn't help. I just hung out in my room thinking about how useless I had become. It wasn't until my sergeant talked with me that things started to change. He shared with me how he experienced these same feelings after one of his soldiers was killed on his last deployment. He described the guilt he felt that he could not save this kid who he was responsible for. He eventually realized that dwelling on the loss of this one soldier put the other soldiers he was responsible for in danger. Instead of focusing on the death of one, he focused on saving the lives of the dozens he was in charge of. His sharing his experience made me realize that I was an important part of a team, and that my guys needed me out there. I had the experience to help keep them safe. Once my Sergeant put me back on missions, my confidence started to grow. The feelings of weakness eventually left. I became a better soldier and more connected to my guys."

This story highlights a few key points. First, the weakness and confusion following trauma are temporary. Second, talking with others can help you gain a different perspective and clarity. And third, overcoming negative ruminations by getting back on the horse and gaining new life experience leads to recovery and growth. Although this soldier's case is unique in its circumstances, it is not unique in its outcome. The story of being shaken and feeling defeated but eventually getting on the path to growth is common.

Here are some questions to help you assess your beliefs about safety before your trauma.

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### EXERCISE: Safety Before Trauma

Respond to the questions in the space provided.

1. Think back to the time before your traumatic experience (or first traumatic experience if you've suffered repeated traumas). How would you describe your views about your personal safety? How confident were you that you could keep yourself safe?

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Prior to the trauma, how would you rate your ability to keep yourself safe? Use a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being completely. Circle one.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

2. Prior to the trauma, how would you describe your ability to keep others safe?

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## THE POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH WORKBOOK

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Prior to the trauma, how would you rate your ability to keep others safe? Use a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being completely. Circle one.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

3. Before the trauma, what were your views about how safe the world was in general? Overall, was it a safe place? Was it filled with danger? What things made it safe or dangerous?

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Prior to the trauma, how safe would you have rated the world? Use a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being completely. Circle one.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

4. Considering that we all feel weak at times, how would you describe the degree to which you saw yourself as weak prior to the trauma? At what times did you feel the weakest?

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Prior to the trauma, how would you have rated your overall level of weakness? Use a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being completely. Circle one.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

This exercise gives you a feel for your sense of safety and personal strength before you experienced the trauma. This is a baseline from which you can compare how you felt later.

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Following trauma, your sense of safety as well as your sense of personal strength may have changed. Here are some questions to help you explore any difference between then and now.

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## EXERCISE: Safety After Trauma

Respond to the questions in the space provided.

1. How would you describe your views about your personal safety now? How confident are you that you can keep yourself safe?

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On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being completely, how would you rate your ability to keep yourself safe? Circle one.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

2. How would you now describe your ability to keep others safe?

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On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being completely, how would you rate your ability to keep others safe? Circle one.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

3. Describe your views now about how safe the world is in general. Do you feel it is a safe place? Is it filled with danger? What things make it safe or dangerous?

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THE POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH WORKBOOK

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being completely, how safe do you rate the world now? Circle one.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

4. Considering that we all feel weak at times, how would you describe the degree to which you see yourself as weak now? When do you feel the weakest?

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On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being completely, how would you rate your overall level of weakness now? Circle one.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

These exercises together can help you assess if your beliefs about safety and your own personal strength have changed since the trauma. If your views of personal safety and your own strength have changed very little, it could be because you've already made significant gains since your trauma. If your views have changed a great deal, the trauma may be still relatively fresh and you are just beginning on the path to posttraumatic growth.

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## Pay Attention to the Signs

How do you know if you are making progress toward recovery and growth? There are signs, but they can be easy to miss because they are often subtle. In fact, unless you deliberately spend time searching, it's unlikely you will notice them. And if you aren't seeing them, we ask you to trust us, for they are most certainly there.

What does strength look like? The short answer is that it depends on the person. Each of us comes to the table with different types and degrees of strength. It may be that you have greater courage in social situations. It could be that instead of withdrawing from the unfamiliar, you are more comfortable approaching strangers at a party or at work. Or it could be that you start to talk more freely with loved ones about the trauma.

A good way to recognize your various strengths is to look at how your life has changed, and is changing, in three core areas of life: family, work (or school or child-rearing), and social relationships. The next exercise will help you identify your personal strengths.

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### EXERCISE: Recognizing Your Strengths

Make a list of strengths you possess within your family, in your work, and in your relationships. Describe how you know that these are strengths and whether they existed before the trauma. If they existed before the trauma, describe how they have gotten stronger. If these strengths are new, describe how they developed. If you run out of space, use your journal to list and write about any additional strengths you possess. If you get stuck and can't recognize any of your own strengths, ask someone who knows you well.

**Family strengths.** List your strengths, as a spouse, parent, sibling, or child, within your family, and answer the questions that follow. Use the space provided after the example.

Example:

*I have shared more intimate information about myself with my husband.*

How do you know this is a strength? What's the evidence?

*My husband commented to me that he's happy that I'm sharing more personal information about myself with him. He also told me he feels more connected to me emotionally.*

Did this strength exist prior to the trauma, or is it new? If you've always had this strength, how has it changed? If it's new, how did it develop?

*No. This did not exist prior to the trauma. I have always been very careful about what I tell my husband. I think I was afraid of scaring him off or that he would think I'm crazy. I'm pretty sure this new strength developed because I desperately needed someone to talk to, and he was willing to listen. I'm glad I took the risk.*

**Family strength 1:** \_\_\_\_\_

How do you know this is a strength? What's the evidence? \_\_\_\_\_

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Did this strength exist prior to the trauma, or is it new? If you've always had this strength, how has it changed? If it's new, how did it develop?

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**Family strength 2:** \_\_\_\_\_

How do you know this is a strength? What's the evidence? \_\_\_\_\_

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Did this strength exist prior to the trauma, or is it new? If you've always had this strength, how has it changed? If it's new, how did it develop?

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**Work strengths.** Identify your work-related strengths and answer the questions that follow. Keep in mind that work is defined here in a broad sense, not just a nine-to-five job. Your work may be going to school or taking care of children and the home.

**Work strength 1:** \_\_\_\_\_

How do you know this is a strength? What's the evidence? \_\_\_\_\_

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Did this strength exist prior to the trauma, or is it new? If you've always had this strength, how has it changed? If it's new, how did it develop?

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**Work strength 2:** \_\_\_\_\_

How do you know this is a strength? What's the evidence? \_\_\_\_\_

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Did this strength exist prior to the trauma, or is it new? If you've always had this strength, how has it changed? If it's new, how did it develop?

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**Relationship strengths.** Identify your relationship-related strengths, such as relationships with friends, peers, or strangers, and answer the questions that follow. Add family and work relationships if you did not include them in the previous two exercises.

**Relationship strength 1:** \_\_\_\_\_

How do you know this is a strength? What's the evidence? \_\_\_\_\_

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Did this strength exist prior to the trauma, or is it new? If you've always had this strength, how has it changed? If it's new, how did it develop?

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**Relationship strength 2:** \_\_\_\_\_

How do you know this is a strength? What's the evidence? \_\_\_\_\_

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Did this strength exist prior to the trauma, or is it new? If you've always had this strength, how has it changed? If it's new, how did it develop?

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**Additional strengths:** Use the space below to identify any additional strengths you notice about yourself that do not fit into one of these three categories. For example, you may notice strength in your faith and spirituality or in your emotional and physical health.

**Additional strength:** \_\_\_\_\_

How do you know this is a strength? What's the evidence? \_\_\_\_\_

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Did this strength exist prior to the trauma, or is it new? If you've always had this strength, how has it changed? If it's new, how did it develop?

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**Additional strength:** \_\_\_\_\_

How do you know this is a strength? What's the evidence? \_\_\_\_\_

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Did this strength exist prior to the trauma, or is it new? If you've always had this strength, how has it changed? If it's new, how did it develop?

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We hope this exercise has helped you to better identify the various strengths you currently possess, particularly if these strengths are new. This is part of the growth process. It's important to continue this type of deliberate review and analysis of your life. This is the only way to truly appreciate your inner strength.

## Coping Mechanisms: Using What Works

An important way to develop strength and resilience is to use healthy coping mechanisms. Coping mechanisms are defenses against stress and psychological discomfort. They can be used consciously or unconsciously and are often categorized into *adaptive*, or healthy, behaviors, and *maladaptive*, or harmful, behaviors.

Which type of coping behavior you tend to choose is largely based on your previous experiences: what you learned from your family as a child and what has and has not worked for you in the past. You may reject coping mechanisms that don't work for you; however, since many of these behaviors are deeply engrained and rooted in your childhood, you may keep using them even when they don't work. Here are some common coping mechanisms people use.

**Negative coping mechanisms:** criticize yourself/say negative things about yourself, use alcohol or drugs, avoid family or friends, act out aggressively/violently toward someone, overeat or not eat enough, keep your emotions bottled up, call in sick to work/school when you're not sick, shout, scream or yell at someone, throw something, drive fast, intentionally harm yourself (cutting), throw something, bite your fingernails, worry about things, criticize or blame others, smoke

**Positive coping mechanisms:** meditation, deep breathing/relaxation, humor/laughter, read a book/watch television, take a bath or shower, listen to music, pray or go to church, draw, paint, color, or write, talk with a family member or friend, work in the garden/yard, exercise, take a nap, go to a movie, engage in a hobby, scream into a pillow, cry

These two lists are by no means complete—there are thousands of different coping mechanisms that people use—but they give you an idea of the difference between positive and negative coping. It is also important to realize that going to extremes with a coping mechanism can sometimes make it unhealthy—for example, sleeping too much, or watching TV too much, or exercising too much. Be aware of when attempts to cope get in the way of other activities or interfere with your relationships. The next exercise will help you see which coping mechanisms you are already using and whether they are healthy or unhealthy.

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## EXERCISE: Your Coping Mechanisms

Create a list of the coping mechanisms you use to deal with stress or uncomfortable situations. If you tend to use any that we listed under positive and negative coping mechanisms, write them here, and add any others that you use. Place a check mark next to each coping mechanism that you list to indicate whether the way you are using it is positive or negative:

\_\_\_\_\_ positive \_\_\_\_\_ or negative \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ positive \_\_\_\_\_ or negative \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ positive \_\_\_\_\_ or negative \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ positive \_\_\_\_\_ or negative \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ positive \_\_\_\_\_ or negative \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ positive \_\_\_\_\_ or negative \_\_\_\_\_

Now that you have a better idea about the coping mechanisms that you are already using, you're in a better position to decide if you want to make any changes. It's important for your posttraumatic growth to replace any negative coping mechanisms with positive ones.

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The importance of positive coping mechanisms following trauma is that they allow you to manage the emotional and physical symptoms trauma causes. Without them, you would have no ability to fight off the ill effects of what's happened to you. It's a bit like the role of antibodies in fighting off infections. When you become infected with bacteria or a virus, your body mobilizes specific proteins (antibodies) that wage war against the foreign invader. The same is true psychologically. When you are confronted with the emotional and physical consequences of trauma, your mind can mobilize positive coping strategies to fight back.

However, if you have found that you tend to use a lot of negative coping mechanisms to cope with the trauma, it will make the process of growth much harder. If you are having a difficult time, and a lot of time has passed since your trauma, it could

explain why the aftereffects are continuing to be so difficult for you. If your coping mechanisms are negative, we'd like you to make a pledge that you will try to replace them with positive coping mechanisms.

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## EXERCISE: Make a Pledge

*I pledge to try my best to replace my most frequently used negative coping mechanisms with positive ones. I will do this by*

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*The negative coping mechanisms I plan to stop using include*

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*I pledge this on this date* \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.

*Signed,*

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In our work over the years with all types of clients, we've found that the simple act of making a pledge to yourself can have tremendous benefit.



There is one more important thing we need to point out about coping mechanisms: they can be helpful but only up to a point. Yes, they are helpful in fighting off the effects of trauma, but relying too heavily on them will keep you stuck and make achieving growth more difficult. That's why finding what works is important. Having a variety of coping mechanisms is usually best, especially since some may be more appropriate for certain circumstances than others.

Again, confronting the distressing aspects of your trauma is key to moving forward. A little avoidance can be useful in providing temporary relief from distress, but consistently avoiding confronting the trauma is not. Therefore, knowing when to confront trauma and how much to do it is critical. It's a lot like a dosing schedule for treating allergies. If exposed to very low doses of an allergen over time, a person can develop a tolerance to the allergen. As the tolerance to the allergen increases, eventually, the person no longer has a reaction to it.

Unfortunately, there is no perfect formula for determining how much confrontation is too much or not enough. It really depends on you. A good rule of thumb is to confront your distressing thoughts, feelings, and reminders of the traumatic event even though you may be upset and find yourself wanting to stop. But if you start to feel like you are losing control or becoming too overwhelmed, you can always pull back. Remember that the longer you confront your trauma, the easier it gets. Eventually, the trauma will have little to no emotional hold on you and will be replaced with a new-found meaning and purpose.

## Asking for Help

We've talked about how there are many paradoxes associated with posttraumatic growth. For example, from loss can come tremendous gain; from vulnerability and weakness comes strength and resilience. Here's another: one of the primary ways of showing strength and resilience during periods of vulnerability is to ask for help.

Modern-day Western society is based on the idea that people should be independent and self-reliant. We are inundated with messages from television, movies, and newspaper and magazine articles about how we should "be strong" and "not rely on other people for our happiness." Independence and self-reliance are important. But taken to the extreme, they can be harmful to recovery and interfere with growth.

Asking for help is one of the most important ingredients in posttraumatic growth. Without assistance and support from others, you will be limited in what you can accomplish. Think about it. If you look back on your life and consider some of your most prized accomplishments, you will likely see how others helped you succeed. We do not

live in isolation, and rarely do we accomplish anything without some level of assistance from others. But following trauma, people tend to withdraw from others and refuse to ask for help. This leads to continued despair and is a roadblock to posttraumatic growth.

The reasons people are hesitant in asking for help vary. Some say they are afraid of being rejected or are embarrassed and ashamed. Others don't want to be a burden, or they have internalized the idea of being independent and self-reliant to such a degree that they have never learned how to ask for help. It's also important to let go of your pride. It's common to try to maintain an attitude of being strong. You may want to have a reputation of being strong because society places so much value on being independent and self-reliant. But trying too hard to be or look strong for others also gives the impression that you have no needs, so others may not recognize how you are hurting. This leads you to feel lonely, isolated, and not understood. This is a particular problem for men, as society places an even higher expectation of stoicism and self-sufficiency on them, but it occurs in women as well. And if left unchecked, it will most surely keep you stuck in the past.

Remember, strength is necessary to navigate trauma and its aftermath, and it comes in many forms. At times, it may seem like you have little left in your reserves. The truth, however, is that strength lies deep inside you. It exists in your vulnerability and weakness. It resides in your ability to ask for help and seek support from those around you. It shows when you let down your guard and trust that others understand and care about you. As you proceed on the path of posttraumatic growth, it's important to keep these things in mind. Your inner strength is what has gotten you to this point, so far. Our hope is that you are able to unlock its full potential, so you will do more than just live. It's our hope that you will flourish.