

## CHAPTER 3

# Processing Trauma and Its Aftermath

**M**anaging the aftermath of a traumatic event can be difficult. The average person is flooded with different emotions, struggling to make sense of what happened and trying to find ways to make things “normal” again. Some people have support systems in place, which they can rely on for strength and comfort. Others have few to no resources to fall back on. Regardless of which group you fall into, this chapter offers some techniques and tools you can use to minimize the effects of difficult emotions that can be distressing or overwhelming. Learning to manage these emotions is an important step toward posttraumatic growth.

In addition to having strong emotions, many people battle unwanted and intrusive thoughts post-trauma. This is a normal and expected part of the healing process, as your mind tries to make sense of what happens to you after a tragedy. However, it’s possible to get stuck, so you can’t move past your thoughts. Through reflective thinking, you can turn these intrusive thoughts into a new story about what happened to you. As the author of your future, you can take control of your direction and explore new possibilities that may have been hidden for years. In the following pages, we will show you how.

## Trauma and Emotions

In the days, weeks, months, and even years following a traumatic event, many trauma survivors struggle with a variety of strong and powerful emotions. Some people experience sadness and grief whereas others struggle with intense anxiety. Depending on the type of trauma, anger and rage may be the biggest emotional hurdles to clear. Outwardly directed emotions like anger are seen mostly in those who have suffered a very personal

and intimate violation, such as a rape or an assault, or who have been harmed through the intentional action of another (this could include being injured by a drunk driver). And then there is guilt, or blaming yourself for what has happened.

People experience these emotions in different ways. Take anxiety, for example. Anxiety comes in many forms and goes by many names, such as worry, stress, nervousness, panic, or jitteriness. Just knowing how to label your anxious feelings may seem impossible, but the label is not so important. What's important is being able to recognize that what you're experiencing is anxiety, for then you can deal with it. It's also important to understand that everyone experiences various types and degrees of anxiety. So how do you recognize it? Some anxious people are worriers. They constantly think about what has gone wrong, is going wrong, or will go wrong. Others carry anxiety in their bodies. They carry around a constant tension in their shoulders or have this sinking feeling in the pit of their stomach. And some people, out of nowhere, experience these warm rushes throughout their whole body, which turns into fast breathing, sweating, dizziness, and shakiness.

Sadness is easier to identify. At some point, each and every one of us has had a period in which we were down, depressed, blue, or just felt plain blah. Sadness is a part of life. After trauma, though, sadness may become a daily part of your existence. You may struggle just to get out of bed in the morning, or you may avoid spending time with loved ones. Things you enjoyed in the past are no longer of interest to you. And it takes all your energy to do even the most basic things. For many trauma survivors, the driving force behind sadness is grief. This is especially true for those who are struggling because of the death of a spouse, parent, or child. Or your grief could be related to the loss of a job or intimate relationship. Basically, grief is the powerful emotional response we all experience when we lose something of value to us.

Anger has often been labeled as depression turned outward or toward someone else. As psychologists, we appreciate the simplicity of this view. However, we also understand that it's not so simple. Anger is a complex emotion. It's powerful and can lead to a variety of physical, emotional, relationship, and even legal problems. And if not controlled early in the aftermath of trauma, it can limit your ability to recover and grow from the traumatic event.

Guilt is also a complex emotion. Guilt is what you feel when you believe, whether you are right or wrong in your belief, that you have violated some personal moral standard. For example, a soldier who kills a female enemy on the battlefield may experience grief because of his actions. Even though he was trained to shoot the enemy, he still has a difficult time accepting the fact that he killed a woman. It goes against his beliefs

about what's right and wrong. As another example, a mother whose child survived a terrible school bus crash feels guilty for being happy when other mothers were not so lucky.

As you can see, there are a number of emotions that can overwhelm a person following trauma. We refer to them as *negative emotions* not because they are bad in and of themselves but because they are painful and difficult feelings, and having them can make it hard to get through the day and move toward growth. And these are just a few of the feelings you may experience. At times, it may seem like you are drowning in your own feelings. You may feel frustrated that the traumatic event happened so long ago yet you are still struggling. Whether you are in the immediate days following the traumatic event or have suffered repeated traumas over your lifetime or are faced with continuing difficulties, there are ways you can better manage the negative emotions you're struggling with on a day-to-day basis. With five decades of combined experience and our work with thousands of people, we know how difficult this process can be. But we also know how resilient people are. We are constantly in awe of the incredible spirit and strength of the average person.

You can learn to manage your emotions. The exercises in this chapter are resources that you can use at any time and in a variety of situations. As you go through this process of growth, you will likely find it useful to frequently refer back to them. You may even find them useful in managing the day-to-day struggles we all face.

First we want you to take a few minutes to identify the different negative emotions that you may be experiencing related to your trauma. The goal is not to focus on what's wrong but to identify which feelings you may need to target.

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## EXERCISE: Name and Understand Your Feelings

The following lists of negative feelings include some that you may be experiencing. Circle the feelings that most seem to fit with your experience. Each list of feelings starts with a general feeling and follows with variations. You would circle the word *angry* if this matches your experience, but you may also want to circle another word or words to more closely describe the feeling you have, such as *enraged*, *furious*, or *outraged*. Circle whatever term or terms best describe your feelings.

Next, take a few minutes and think about which of these feelings are your most common feelings. What are your top three feelings? In other words, which three feelings cause you the most distress? Place a check mark next to those feelings.

## THE POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH WORKBOOK

FEARFUL	FRUSTRATED	ANGRY	DISGUSTED	APATHETIC
frightened	displeased	mad	tired of	stoic
apprehensive	disappointed	enraged	sick of	passive
hysterical	thwarted	aggravated	appalled	bored
afraid	defeated	outraged	disliking	cold
shuddering	aggravated	incensed	hating	unmoved
shivering	dismayed	infuriated	displeased	detached
terrified	upset	smoldering	outraged	distant
panicked	annoyed	indignant	nauseated	unemotional
timid	agitated	hot under the collar	horrified	indifferent
horrified	irritated	livid	repulsed	numb
having the creeps	exasperated	sore		uncaring
alarmed		irate		removed
dreading		furious		uninterested
scared		pissed off		withdrawn

# PROCESSING TRAUMA AND ITS AFTERMATH

<b>GUILTY</b>	<b>TIRED</b>	<b>CONFUSED</b>	<b>SAD</b>	<b>STRESSED</b>
ashamed	fatigued	baffled	bitter	troubled
embarrassed	overworked	bewildered	melancholy	distressed
remorseful	drained	ambivalent	heartbroken	upset
regretful	beat	dazed	depressed	on edge
humiliated	wiped out	hesitant	despairing	anxious
sorry	wasted	confounded	somber	cranky
hesitant	depleted	befuddled	pessimistic	distraught
shy	exhausted	lost	sorrowful	frazzled
bashful	finished	mystified	discouraged	irritable
distraught	lethargic	bemused	gloomy	anxious
	spent	perplexed	hopeless	nervous
	worn out	puzzled	unhappy	overwhelmed
		torn	down	restless
			low	unsettled
			blue	

## THE POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH WORKBOOK

Now look again at the three feelings that you feel most often, and use the space provided to reflect on two things. First say why you think these three feelings dominate the way you feel. Then try to describe how these three feelings affect your emotional and physical health. You can do this by simply writing down whatever comes to mind.

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The main goal of this exercise was to help you to identify the different feelings you experienced, or are still experiencing, after your trauma. Putting your different feelings into words can be helpful. You can benefit from this exercise even if you tend to use other words to describe how you feel. When you talk about your trauma with friends, family, a spiritual leader, or a therapist, you may want to see how some new feeling words fit into your discussions. And if you are not at a point where you can talk to others, strengthening your feeling vocabulary will help you better identify and process whatever you are feeling.

A secondary goal was to help you consider why your feelings may have so much power over you and what kind of impact they have on your overall well-being. In reality, we spend little time thinking about why we feel the way we do, and we move through life as if feelings are facts. The truth is that we have control over our feelings.

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## Taking Control of Your Emotions

Now that you've identified which distressing emotions you're experiencing, we'll teach you some new ways to manage them. In the following pages, we describe several effective techniques for managing strong emotions. These techniques are based on psychological research, and we have used them successfully with countless people. We know they work. However, they will work only if you practice them. Try to keep an open mind, and avoid automatically dismissing the techniques as too easy, too difficult, or too "psychological."

### Take a Deep Breath

When you've been stressed, someone has probably told you to...you guessed it...breathe. There is no easier, cheaper, or more effective way to manage negative emotions than proper breathing. And it's not difficult to learn. We all have to breathe. Unfortunately, most of us do it wrong. The majority of people are chest breathers. This means that using your chest muscles instead of your diaphragm or stomach muscles to breathe. The easiest way to see how you breathe is to place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Breathe normally. If you notice your hand on your chest moving up and down, then you are a chest breather. If the one on your stomach moves more, then you are a diaphragm breather. If you are a diaphragm breather, congratulations! If not, here's what you can do to change that.

Learning to use your diaphragm when breathing helps maintain balance within the *fight-or-flight system*, the delicate biological process that prepares us all for threats to our safety (fight or run) and returns us to normal when the threat is gone. The fight-or-flight system is generally set at a higher throttle in trauma survivors than everyone else, which makes it difficult to manage negative emotions and calm down. Deep breathing can help you lower that throttle and bring you back down to baseline. This in turn helps you manage negative emotions like anxiety, stress, anger, fear, and frustration.

## EXERCISE: Diaphragmatic Breathing

Look around and find a quiet and comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. You'll need to be able to use this space for ten or fifteen minutes. It could be in your office with the door closed, at home in your bedroom, or outside away from distractions. Either lie flat or comfortably recline with your back and neck supported. Place your right hand on your chest and your left hand on your stomach. Slowly inhale through your nose. Hold your breath for a count of one and then slowly let the air effortlessly leave your body. As you breathe, make sure the hand on your chest stays still while the hand on your stomach rises and falls with each breath. Now as you breathe, visualize a balloon in your stomach. Each time you take a breath in through your nose, the balloon inflates. Each time you allow it to leave your body, the balloon deflates. Repeat this process for ten to fifteen minutes. And remember to make sure the hand on your chest stays still while the hand on your stomach goes up and down.

Practice this type of breathing for just a few minutes at least twice a day for two weeks to get good at it. You may want to practice in the morning before your day starts and in the evening before you turn in for bed. If you practice regularly, you'll be better able to use this technique when you need it to help you calm down.

You can also begin using this technique as situations arise throughout the day. For example, if you find yourself becoming nervous before making a trip to the store, take a few minutes to calm your fight-or-flight system before you leave the house. It will make the drive much easier. If your anxiety peaks once you pull into the parking lot, practice breathing in your car before going into the store.

Spend a few minutes writing and reflecting on this technique. Is it helpful? If so, why? If not, why not? Are there barriers to using it in your daily life? If so, what can you do to overcome those barriers?

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## Relax with Progressive Muscle Relaxation

When stressed or frustrated, you've probably also had someone tell you to just relax. For the most part, it's good advice (though it can be hard to take if the person telling you to relax is being a bit condescending). The problem, of course, is that you may want to relax, but it feels like your mind and body are not cooperating. A relaxation technique called *progressive muscle relaxation* is an effective way to manage stress, anxiety, anger, and sadness.

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### EXERCISE: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably. You'll need to have this space to yourself for ten to fifteen minutes. As you sit comfortably with your feet on the floor and back straight, take a deep breath through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Do this for one or two minutes. Now shift your attention to your left foot. Slowly tense your foot by curling your toes under and squeezing tightly. Hold this tension for five seconds and then relax your foot. Do it again. Curl your toes under, hold for five seconds, and release. Notice the difference in how your foot feels as you tense and relax it. Now do the same thing for your right foot. Curl, hold, and release. And repeat. Now do the same thing for your calves, thighs, buttocks, back, shoulders,

Spend a few minutes writing and reflecting on this technique. Is it helpful? If so, why? If not, why not? Are there barriers to using it in your daily life? If so, what can you do to overcome those barriers?

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears to be from a notebook or a standard sheet of stationery. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

## Imagery

Using imagery or visualization is another great way to keep the fight-or-flight system in balance. It's also a great way to resist negative thoughts that fuel sadness, grief, and guilt. Imagery allows you to temporarily remove yourself mentally and emotionally from your negative thoughts or chaotic and stressful surroundings. In essence, it acts as a positive distraction from your distress as it calms your mind and body. Below is an imagery exercise you can practice daily and use whenever stressful situations arise, to give yourself a break and a chance to manage your emotions. Read through it a few times first, so you are familiar with the flow of the exercise. Once you've got it, go ahead and start using it.

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### EXERCISE: Imagery

Find a quiet place where you can sit in a chair comfortably. You'll need to have this space to yourself for ten to fifteen minutes. As you sit comfortably with your feet on the floor and back straight, take a deep breath through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Do this for one or two minutes. You can close your eyes at any point. Allow the vision of a peaceful, safe, and comfortable place to enter your mind. It can be a place you've been to before or somewhere you've always wanted to go. It can even be a place that exists only in your mind. Once you can visualize this place, take some time to look around it. Pay close attention to the details of where you are. Spend thirty seconds noticing the colors that surround you. What colors do you see? How vivid are they? Spend thirty seconds noticing the different shapes in your place. Are there a lot of straight edges or curves? Take note of the temperature. Is it hot, cold, or just right? What sounds do you hear? Are there any smells you recognize? Spend as much time as you like noticing the surroundings in your place. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes and let your vision adjust to the light in the room. Notice how you feel once you have finished the exercise.

Using imagery is a great way to briefly leave the harsh reality that trauma leaves in its wake. It's not denial but rather a break from self-criticism and self-doubt, shame and guilt, and remorse. It's a preview of what can be or a memory of how things once were. When you find yourself consumed with negative thoughts, overcome with worry and fear, or unable to calm your mind and body, imagery can come to your rescue.

Spend a few minutes writing and reflecting on this technique. Is it helpful? If so, why? If not, why not? Are there barriers to using it in your daily life? If so, what can you do to overcome those barriers?

## Check Your Thoughts

The Greek philosopher Epictetus is credited with the statement, “It’s not what happens to you but how you react to it that matters.” As psychologists, we agree but with one slight adjustment. We prefer to say, “It’s not what happens to you, but how you *think about what happens to you* that matters.” More to come about thoughts soon...

Humans are far from perfect. We make mistakes all the time. This is especially true when it comes to our thoughts. In general, we are all prone to misinterpreting things that happen to us in life. This is not unique to trauma survivors. For example, a husband might think his spouse is cheating on him when she says she wants to spend the evening with her girlfriend once a week. In reality, she just wants to spend time with her friend. For trauma survivors, there is a greater tendency to perceive things in a negative light.

A plumber fixing a leaky faucet may be seen as a potential rapist by a woman who was sexually assaulted. Or the combat-weary soldier may think a bag of trash on the side of the road is a makeshift bomb.

These misinterpretations and misperceptions pop into the trauma survivor's head without warning, which can make you feel helpless over your thoughts. This helplessness leads to greater anxiety, sadness, anger, guilt, and many other negative emotions. But you are not helpless. In fact, you can control these thoughts and learn to replace them with more realistic and helpful ones.

You may already associate having certain thoughts and feelings together in response to certain situations. A form of psychotherapy called cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) teaches that thoughts and feelings go hand in hand—that if you are thinking a certain way, it will make you feel a certain way, and vice versa. The following CBT exercise is designed to help you do three things. First it teaches you to recognize your *automatic thoughts*, thoughts that come in response to a situation or a triggering event. This is the first step in controlling automatic thoughts that fuel your negative emotions. Second, it allows you to test the reality of your thoughts. Much of the time automatic thoughts that fuel negative emotions have little basis in reality. You can test them and see that they are not true by identifying the evidence for and against your automatic thoughts. And last, through this exercise, you can find alternative, more realistic thoughts and views to replace the ones that contribute to your negative emotions. These alternative thoughts tend to lead to a more positive or neutral outlook about your situation.

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### EXERCISE: Keeping a Thought Record

Think of a recent situation or event that triggered an unwanted emotion. Fill in the blanks after reading the example.

1. What was the situation? Describe where you were and what you were doing.

Example: *I was sitting in traffic on my way home after work. I saw this older couple talking and laughing with each other in the car next to me.*

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2. What was your emotion or feeling at the time? How strong was it?

Example: *I was feeling sad. On a scale of 1 to 10, it would have been an 8.*

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3. What was your thinking at the time? What did you think automatically in response to the situation?

Example: *I will never be that happy with anyone ever again. Once David left, I lost my only chance for growing old with someone I loved.*

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4. What was the evidence supporting what you were thinking?

Example: *Some people only fall in love once, and the older you get the more difficult it is to meet people.*

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5. What was the evidence against what you were thinking?

Example: *I was in love with someone else before David, so there's no reason I couldn't fall in love with someone again.*

*I have many friends and family who I love and they love me.*

*I will feel loved and love others for a long time.*

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6. What could you have thought instead in this situation? What is an alternative thought that would be more positive or neutral?

Example: *I fell in love before, so I can fall in love again.*

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The goal of this exercise was simple. It was to help you identify, challenge, and replace automatic negative thoughts that lead to unwanted feelings that are hard to manage. If you practice this exercise regularly in response to situations that trigger negative thoughts, it will help you be less critical of yourself, feel less defeated or fearful, and set aside some of your shame or guilt. It's not offered to pretend that life isn't hard or that your struggles aren't real. It's a way to help you gain a different perspective—a perspective that will help you with the process of healing and recovery, a perspective that will get you on the road to growth.

Spend a few minutes writing and reflecting on this exercise. Was it helpful? If so, why? If not, why not? Are there barriers to using this exercise in your daily life? If so, what can you do to overcome those barriers?

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As you can see, the techniques we describe in this section are relatively simple. But though simple to use, they can be a powerful help in managing your emotions. As we said before, these techniques will work only if you practice them, so please do.

## Taking Control of Intrusive Thoughts

Negative emotions are not the only unwelcomed consequences of trauma. Recurrent and intrusive thoughts plague many people after a traumatic event. Intrusive thoughts are unpleasant involuntary thoughts, ideas, and images. These unwanted intruders are a prominent and common symptom of the formal diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. They are similar to the negative automatic thoughts discussed earlier. The main difference is that intrusive thoughts tend to be trauma focused. These thoughts replay portions of the traumatic event or events and are very distressing. You may feel helpless and unable to stop them, which further fuels negative emotions and reduces your ability to recover from the traumatic event. For example, when you have trouble controlling these reactions, you might start telling yourself that *I'm out of control* or asking yourself, *What's wrong with me?* This kind of thinking makes things even worse.

To move down the path to growth, it's important to gain control of these unwelcomed thoughts. Again, the first step is to increase awareness. The following exercise helps you to identify intrusive thoughts, images, and ideas that you may have.

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### EXERCISE: Recording Intrusive Thoughts

Think of an intrusive thought that you had recently. Identify any triggers that may have preceded your intrusive thought. This may take some time, as it is often not very obvious. Next, write out what the intrusive thought, idea, or image was that followed the trigger. Then reflect on the meaning behind it and write down your thoughts. For example, what does it say about you, if anything? What does the thought have to do with your situation? Then list any ways you coped or managed the thought. Fill in the blanks with your own situation after reading the example.

#### **Situation or trigger:**

Example: *A strange man knocked on the door.*

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**Intrusive thought, idea, or image:**

Example: *The image of the man who attacked me popped into my head. I kept replaying the moment he put his hand around my mouth and threw me to the ground.*

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**Interpretation (or what the intrusive thought means to you):**

Example: *Since I'm still having these images so frequently, I don't think I've been able to move forward and put the assault behind me. I have more healing to do. Some part of me still thinks that all men are dangerous and out to hurt me.*

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**Coping strategy:**

Example: *I didn't answer the door. Instead, I spent the next ten minutes practicing my deep breathing and imagery exercises. I also spent some time reflecting on what things I need to do to better handle what happened to me. Finally, I called my friend Becky, who has always been a source of support and compassion for me.*

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After completing this exercise, you should have a better appreciation for the types of intrusive thoughts that are unique to you.

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Identifying your intrusive thoughts is only the first step. Next you must turn your intrusive thoughts into a new story through a deliberate reflection on what happened to you.

## Reflective Rumination

The next step in managing unwanted and unwelcomed intrusive thoughts may seem unusual. That's because we're asking you to do something that may seem directly opposite to what you've done in the past. We'd like you to spend some time thinking about your intrusive thoughts instead of pushing them out or ignoring them.

Most people's initial reaction when confronted with a distressing thought or image is to get away from it as quickly as possible. This makes sense, because why would you want to make yourself feel bad by purposefully thinking about something bad that happened? In reality, however, avoiding the distressing thoughts gives these thoughts strength and keeps them alive. It also allows the thoughts to take on a life of their own. By trying to understand these thoughts about what happened to you, you get the opportunity to challenge errors in your thinking about what happened. As humans, we are prone to have errors in our thinking, and most of the time the errors are not in our favor.

So how do you think about your thoughts? It's through the process of reflective rumination (introduced in chapter 2). Reflective rumination is simply the process of deliberately focusing on those things that you are saying to yourself. This will allow you to determine what makes sense and how to most logically think about your trauma and its aftermath. The best way to accomplish this is to set some time aside each day to do nothing but focus on your thoughts.

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### EXERCISE: Reflect on Your Thoughts

Create a twenty-minute block of time each day to reflect on your thoughts. When you create this time for yourself is completely up to you. It may be before work or after you get home, or any time of day when you are not distracted by the chaos of work or school or other responsibilities. It's also important to delay any intrusive thoughts you may have during the day until you can think about them during this time that you've set aside. If unwanted thoughts pop into your head while at work or while shopping, just remind yourself that you've set time aside to think about these things. You can even jot down a quick note as a reminder, but then quickly move on with your day. Make sure that the time and place you choose to reflect on your thoughts is as free from distractions as possible.

Here is how we would like you to deal with your thoughts. As the thoughts enter your mind, simply acknowledge them. Avoid any attempt to push them out, label them, or pass judgment on them. Notice any emotions that they bring up for you. Do these thoughts tend to be harsh or critical? Are they self-blaming in nature?

Notice the general content of the thoughts as well as any themes that may connect them. If you find that a thought is too distressing for you, move on to another one or come back to this exercise later. In this way, you are becoming a neutral observer of your own thoughts rather than having emotional reactions to them. This is a first step toward getting control over them. Strangely enough, in order to get control over your thoughts, you are now just letting them be what they are and noticing them. It's as if you were a scientist observing yourself, collecting the data on what your mind does.

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Once you are comfortable allowing yourself the time to acknowledge and reflect on your thoughts, the next step is to check them for accuracy. Again, we are all prone to making errors in our thinking. We assume things to be true when in reality they are not. And in most cases, we tend to be hard on ourselves rather than give ourselves some slack. The reasons we do this vary, but it's often a by-product of how we grew up. As children, we do our best to make sense of the confusing world around us. Unfortunately, our experience is limited and we tend to draw incorrect conclusions about things. For example, if our parents get into an argument, we may think it's our fault, or if our teacher is in a bad mood and yells at the class for being too loud, we may think she is directing her anger at us and may label ourselves as bad. These early perceptions follow us into adulthood in many different forms. Therefore, as an adult, it's important to periodically check the correctness of your thinking.

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### EXERCISE: Questioning the Evidence

Use the space provided to log your intrusive thinking after you have had time to reflectively ruminate. For each thought, look for the evidence that supports it. Then look for the evidence that doesn't support the thought, or challenges it. Once you have completed the first two steps, see if you can come up with an alternative thought or statement that is more based in reality and probability. Do this for each of your intrusive thoughts to reveal the errors in your thinking and to come up with a more positive outlook. An example is provided.

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Your intrusive thought	Evidence for the thought	Challenging the evidence	More realistic thought
<b>Example:</b> <i>It's my fault Marie was killed by the drunk driver.</i>	<i>I was driving the car that night.</i>	<i>The drunk driver is the one who crossed over into our lane. I didn't have a chance to react.</i>	<i>The drunk driver was responsible for her death. He chose to drink and drive. He passed out at the wheel and ran into us.</i>

It's our hope that with reflective rumination, you will be better able to identify errors in your thinking, particularly those errors that may be contributing to your distress and keeping you from seeing new possibilities.

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We believe that how you think and what you say to yourself directly affects how you feel and how you behave. If your feelings and behaviors are fueled by negative errors, then your feelings and behaviors will be inconsistent with how you want to be. Unless corrected, this pattern will prevent you from opening new doors in your life and keep you stuck in the past. Once you unlock those doors, you will be confronted with many new possibilities for your future.

## A Few Final Thoughts

As we mentioned earlier, the greatest paradox of posttraumatic growth is that out of loss, there can be growth—a new story of meaning and integrity and of a life that rewards you. This is the ultimate point of the book. Even in the face of unthinkable tragedy, possibilities for growth are waiting for you. Where you once were vulnerable, you can be strong and resilient. Everyone's story is different, but they all hold the possibility of growth.

The most important thing to remember is that your life after trauma is not fixed or static. It can change, and you have the ability to shape your future any way you like. This process is neither easy nor quick. It takes time, hard work, and the courage to rely on those around you with whom you find comfort and support. Those people in your life who understand what you've gone through and who appreciate the strength that already resides inside of you can be of greatest help.

Over the next few chapters, you will gain a better understanding of the various ways in which people tend to grow after trauma. And you'll learn various strategies for living a more meaningful life. You will also continue to rely on the strategies you have learned in this chapter and build on them. It's our hope that you are starting to realize that good can come from the bad and that all things are possible if you believe in and work toward a better life.

