

CHAPTER 2

How Trauma Affects Your Thinking

Consider for a moment the aftermath of an earthquake. We have all seen photographs or videos of earthquakes, and you may even have lived through one. Your own trauma was a psychological earthquake. Traumas have a magnitude just as earthquakes do. Some are barely felt, and others are so strong that little can withstand their effects. Furthermore, a city's roads, buildings, power lines, and sewers may be built to standards that allow them to withstand all but the strongest earthquakes, whereas some may be so weak that even a minor earthquake can bring everything crashing down. Similarly, your own reaction to trauma will depend on certain factors.

Looking at your basic beliefs as structures and the traumatic events in your life as earthquakes is a useful way to consider how trauma affects your own thinking. Imagine that your thoughts are like a city's infrastructure. You have an interconnected system of core beliefs that you hold about yourself, the world you live in, the people around you, your past, and your future. Some psychologists have called this system of core beliefs the *assumptive world*, since it reflects what you assume to be true in everyday life. Your own system of core beliefs is unique to you. These beliefs may seem obvious to you, and they serve you well. They make the world seem predictable, and if the world is predictable, you then know how to prepare for it, respond to it, or to control it (or at least you think you can). Like the infrastructure of a city—which provides shelter, water, travel, and power—your beliefs provide the basis for virtually everything you understand and do. And just as the city comes to a halt when its infrastructure is damaged, so it is with your brain in the aftermath of trauma: without it functioning the way it should, you come to a halt.

The Way It Feels When Trauma Hits

What does it feel like when a traumatic event functions like an earthquake? One thing many people say is that they “can’t believe it happened,” and they struggle for long periods of time to come to terms with the fact that it did. They know the fact to be true, but some part of them resists the difficult reality of what has happened. Each morning you may wake up with what feels like a new realization—it really happened. The old system of beliefs is still operating as if things were the way they were before the trauma. A mother whose child has died still thinks she will see him in his bedroom when she walks by, that he will return home from school, or that he will call on the weekend as he has done for years. She knows this is impossible, but it seems more impossible that her child is dead. The reality of life has always been, and therefore was always assumed to be, that the child lives. Furthermore, her assumption was always that her child would outlive her, and though she recognizes that parents sometimes outlive their children, it happens rarely. A further assumption might be that when children die first, it is always someone else’s child. The often-reported experience of reliving the trauma appears to be an attempt to incorporate the fact of the trauma into the understanding someone has about life and how the world is supposed to be. This reliving of trauma can happen in dreams, in sudden flashbacks during the day, or in rumination about the traumatic events.

Another thing that happens to people when their core beliefs, or basic assumptions, are violated is that they are left wondering what to believe now. They feel that the world has suddenly become a strange place and that they need to develop a new understanding to account for what has happened. Again, there is a part of you that may say, “I know this sort of thing happens. I just didn’t think it would ever happen to me!” The way life is going is unanticipated, odd, and difficult to navigate. Life no longer makes sense. For each of us, core beliefs help us to understand and predict events in life and therefore guide our plans and responses. If these beliefs no longer seem to function well because of the damage done to them by trauma, you can feel that you don’t know what to do next or how to respond to an environment that now seems unpredictable and strange. In some ways, life appears to be what you knew, but that appearance, you know, is misleading. Things are different now.

As a survivor of trauma, you also may feel that this new world is a world you don’t wish to be in. You don’t want to understand it, because that would mean you are accepting something you would rather deny is true. So you wish to lodge a protest against this world that has changed and that has betrayed a system of beliefs you always held as true. After traumatic events, it is common for people to be angry for long

periods of time. They are angry not only about what has happened but also about being forced into a position where they need to rethink how the world works, how life is going, and even who they are. These are very difficult tasks that they would prefer to avoid, and they long for the way that things used to be.

Trauma can change not only your environment but also your sense of who you are as a person. Just as we each use our system of core beliefs to understand our environment or other people, we also use it to understand ourselves and to anticipate what we are likely to do in various situations. Traumatic events often confront us with a need to respond, and we may be surprised by what we see in our own responses. Furthermore, trauma brings about other difficult circumstances that we need to respond to, and we may be surprised by our ability, or inability, to cope with them. So your beliefs about what kind of person you are may need a reevaluation as you take note of your own behavior during and after a trauma.

A trauma reveals important aspects of yourself and what kind of world you live in, and you may need to reconsider your future goals in light of these realizations. Perhaps certain goals that you had for yourself before the trauma are now gone, or perhaps these goals no longer seem to have as much meaning as they once did. Given what trauma has taught you, you may no longer believe that you can attain the goals that you had previously set. Or perhaps before the trauma you paid little attention to goals, but you now see a need for goals. Your future may need a closer examination than you have ever given it.

How Traumatic Events Affect You

How much you are struggling with the kinds of issues described above depends on your risk factors, your protective factors, and your maintenance factors (discussed in chapter 1). Your risk factors include the magnitude of the trauma and any weak spots in your core beliefs. Your protective factors include strong core beliefs and any help you might have in being able to strengthen them further. Maintenance of distress may occur when you do not have ways of revising your beliefs and feel stuck in the sense of disbelief or when you avoid thinking through what has happened. Your psychological infrastructure has been damaged in the aftermath of trauma, and you must develop a way to manage your situation so that you can function again.

One thing that makes it difficult to get a city functioning after an earthquake is aftershocks. Aftershocks can bring down already weakened structures and frighten the population so that it's difficult to get on with the process of recovery. People become wary, as they have no idea when an aftershock may occur. They are on edge and try to

protect themselves from further danger. It is hard to know if you're really safe. Trauma survivors of all kinds also find themselves in this situation of feeling unsafe. A cancer survivor fears recurrence. A victim of crime stays on guard against another criminal attack. A person who is bereaved worries that another loved one will die. A soldier awaits the next ambush. The feeling that you are no longer safe in the world is a common post-trauma experience. It makes it difficult to think that life will ever be normal and that you can relax.

A major part of the problem is that trauma can affect your body as well as your mind, so you feel unsafe in both places. We are all built with an internal alarm mechanism that warns us of danger. This same self-protective mechanism that keeps us on guard against threat can cause us to worry. You may have the sense that if you stop worrying about the possible danger, you will be more likely to be victimized by it. Even if you understand that this is not really the case, the idea can be so compelling that you do not dare give up your vigilance. This is what psychologists call *intrusive rumination*. These are thoughts about the trauma and the strange world encountered in the aftermath of trauma. These thoughts come out of nowhere and seem impossible to control. They are typical early reactions to traumatic events although they may continue for months or even years. The more traumatic the event has been for you, the more likely you are to have these intrusive thoughts. This next exercise will help you assess the impact of the trauma on your thinking. The first part looks at how the trauma affected your thinking right after the event. The second part looks at the impact of trauma on your thinking now. The questions in the exercise are from Cann et al. (2011).

EXERCISE: A Self-Assessment of Intrusive Rumination

Immediate impact of trauma on thinking: Try to recall your thought processes immediately after the traumatic event—even if the event happened some time ago—and respond to each statement according to how you were feeling at the time. Circle the number underneath each statement that corresponds to how often, if at all, you had this experience during the weeks immediately after the event.

1. *I thought about the event when I did not mean to.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

HOW TRAUMA AFFECTS YOUR THINKING

2. *Thoughts about the event came to mind, and I could not stop thinking about them.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

3. *Thoughts about the event distracted me or kept me from being able to concentrate.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

4. *I could not keep images or thoughts about the event from entering my mind.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

5. *Thoughts, memories, or images of the event came to mind even when I did not want them to.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

6. *Thoughts about the event caused me to relive my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

7. *Reminders of the event brought back thoughts about my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

8. *I found myself automatically thinking about what had happened.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

THE POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH WORKBOOK

9. *Other things kept leading me to think about my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

10. *I tried not to think about the event but could not keep the thoughts from my mind.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

Current impact of trauma on thinking: Now circle the number below each statement that corresponds to how often, if at all, you had the experience described during the past two weeks.

11. *I thought about the event when I did not mean to.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

12. *Thoughts about the event came to mind, and I could not stop thinking about them.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

13. *Thoughts about the event distracted me or kept me from being able to concentrate.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

14. *I could not keep images or thoughts about the event from entering my mind.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

HOW TRAUMA AFFECTS YOUR THINKING

15. *Thoughts, memories, or images of the event came to mind even when I did not want them to.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

16. *Thoughts about the event caused me to relive my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

17. *Reminders of the event brought back thoughts about my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

18. *I found myself automatically thinking about what had happened.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

19. *Other things kept leading me to think about my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

20. *I tried not to think about the event but could not keep the thoughts from my mind.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

Scoring: Add up the numbers circled for statements 1 to 10 to get your immediate impact score. Use this scale to determine the immediate negative impact of the event on you.

A score of 0–10: No impact: this event was not traumatic. (Exceptions would be if the aftermath was too chaotic to clearly recall or if thinking was too difficult.)

A score of 11–15: Minimal impact: this event may have been stressful but not likely traumatic. (Exceptions would be if the aftermath was too chaotic to clearly recall or if thinking was too difficult.)

A score of 16–20: Significant impact: this event has elements of trauma.

A score of 21–30: Major impact: this event was likely to be traumatic.

Add up the numbers circled for statements 11 to 20 for your current impact score. Use this scale to determine the current negative impact of the event on you.

A score of 0–10: This event is not currently producing traumatic responses.

A score of 11–15: This event is producing minimally stressful responses.

A score of 16–20: This event is producing traumatic stress responses.

A score of 21–30: This event is producing significant traumatic stress.

What You Have Found Out About Your Intrusive Thinking Then

So what have you discovered about what your thinking was like immediately after the traumatic event? You may not recall spending much time thinking about the traumatic event. Alternatively, it may be that you find it hard to think clearly about the immediate aftermath of the trauma, which is especially common for people if it was a chaotic time. There are situations where people are turning to survival, emotionally and/or physically, and they find themselves numb or preoccupied with other critical matters. This can happen in combat and at funerals. Therefore a low score could indicate that the event was traumatic for you, even if you do not specifically recall your thought patterns at that time. In such cases, there may be a delay in the development of disturbing thoughts about a traumatic event. Higher impact scores are common when a traumatic event can be immediately acknowledged.

What You Have Found Out About Your Intrusive Thinking Now

Now consider your tendency to ruminate now. This score on your self-assessment indicates the degree to which your thinking processes may have changed or remained the same since the event. If your score is lower than it was for the first ten questions of this assessment, you may have been able to bring your thinking into line with your existing belief system. Or it's possible you may be working on changing or developing your core beliefs. After a traumatic experience, people sometimes deliberately and intentionally spend time thinking about what has happened. This thinking process is sometimes called *deliberate rumination* or *reflective rumination*, which feels more constructive and under your control. This next exercise will help you assess the degree to which you are involved in core belief change or development. The first part looks at how much you were engaged in reflective thinking after the traumatic event. The second part looks at how much you are engaged in reflective thinking now. The questions in the exercise are from Cann et al. (2011).

EXERCISE: A Self-Assessment of Deliberate or Reflective Rumination

Reflective rumination since the traumatic event: Circle the number underneath each statement that corresponds to the degree to which you have in the past deliberately spent time thinking about these issues.

1. *I thought about whether I could find meaning from my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

2. *I thought about whether changes in my life have come from dealing with my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

THE POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH WORKBOOK

3. *I forced myself to think about my feelings about my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

4. *I thought about whether I have learned anything as a result of my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

5. *I thought about whether the experience has changed my beliefs about the world.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

6. *I thought about what the experience might mean for my future.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

7. *I thought about whether my relationships with others have changed following my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

8. *I forced myself to deal with my feelings about the event.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

9. *I deliberately thought about how the event had affected me.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

HOW TRAUMA AFFECTS YOUR THINKING

10. *I thought about the event and tried to understand what happened.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

Current reflective rumination: Now circle the number underneath each statement that corresponds to the degree to which you currently deliberately spend time thinking about these issues.

11. *I think about whether I can find meaning from my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

12. *I think about whether changes in my life have come from dealing with my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

13. *I force myself to think about my feelings about my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

14. *I think about whether I have learned anything as a result of my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

15. *I think about whether the experience has changed my beliefs about the world.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

THE POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH WORKBOOK

16. *I think about what the experience might mean for my future.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

17. *I think about whether my relationships with others have changed following my experience.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

18. *I force myself to deal with my feelings about the event.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

19. *I deliberately think about how the event has affected me.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

20. *I think about the event and try to understand what happened.*

0	1	2	3
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

Scoring: Add up the numbers circled for statements 1 through 10. This score represents the degree to which you have engaged in reflective rumination in the past.

A score of 0–10: You have given little serious thought to the event.

A score of 11–15: You have given minimal thought to this event.

A score of 16–20: You have given significant thought to this event.

A score of 21–30 You have devoted a great deal of time and energy reflecting on the event and its aftermath.

Now add up the numbers circled for statements 11 to 20 to get the score for how much you currently engage in reflective rumination.

A score of 0–10: You are giving little serious thought to the event.

A score of 11–15: You are giving minimal thought to this event.

A score of 16–20: You are giving significant thought to this event.

A score of 21–30 You are devoting a great deal of time and energy reflecting on the event and its aftermath.

What You Have Found Out About Your Reflective Thinking

The reflective type of thinking that you considered in this self-assessment has been shown in our research to be directly related to the development of posttraumatic growth.

Reflective Thinking Then But Little Now

If you found that you have engaged in this reflective thinking in the past but are not doing so now, you might have essentially completed a process that has led to growth and change. Or perhaps as you engaged in reflective thinking, you tried to understand the experience of trauma but did not find any clarity in your understanding, and so you have deliberately stopped thinking this way. If that's the case, we hope that you will find this book to be a useful way to restart this process with more positive results.

Little Reflective Thinking

If you haven't ever engaged in reflective thinking about your trauma, we hope this book will help start this process for you. The fact that you are reading this book shows that you are ready to engage in this process, and we will help lead you through it.

Much Reflective Thinking

If your score indicated that you are currently engaging in a great deal of reflective thinking, you are in the midst of a process that can produce growth and change. We hope that this book will help you further this experience.

Reflective Thinking and Rebuilding

Deliberate rumination or reflective thinking allows trauma survivors to constructively approach developing a new belief system in the aftermath of trauma. When you move from intrusive rumination to deliberate rumination, you have a sense that you are more in control of what is going on in your mind. You are moving from the shock of confronting the destruction of your beliefs—or perhaps the startling recognition that you need to give more serious thought to how to live your life—to a place where you can build a new system of understanding that can survive this trauma and others in the future. Our earthquake metaphor can help in understanding this process.

In the aftermath of an earthquake, aspects of the infrastructure are typically destroyed to the extent that these aspects were weak in the first place or were facing the brunt of the trauma. Other aspects of the infrastructure may survive relatively unscathed, because they were more resilient. Perhaps they had been built in anticipation of the stress that an earthquake may cause. Likewise, you may have been vulnerable to trauma, or you may have been more resilient because your system of core beliefs included the possibilities of trauma and ways to successfully cope with it.

In the aftermath of an earthquake, it's important to get the city up and running again, but it's also important to take time to rebuild the city to be more resilient to future potential earthquakes and similar disasters. Similarly, as a trauma survivor, you may have needed to respond quickly, so you could continue living, and yet you also need to consider how to live successfully in the future. The latter comes with time, reflection, and hard work.

Accepting Help

In the short term, help may be needed from the outside to keep the city going and to rebuild. When the infrastructure has been shattered, the city is incapable of providing entirely for itself. Other agencies and individuals need to support the city with what is usually provided by the infrastructure—power, sanitation, medical supplies, food, water, and other basic needs. For trauma survivors, the situation is similar. In the immediate aftermath of trauma, it's hard to function normally, and finding support is necessary. Other people may provide not only assistance in getting through the day but also, in terms of your core belief system, a sense of hope, possibility, and something to think about. This allows you to continue to navigate the world that is now so strange.

Building a Resilient System

In the long term, the city needs to rebuild. This rebuilding should make the city more resilient so that it can withstand future tremors as well as larger disasters that now appear to be possible. Likewise, as a trauma survivor, you need to rebuild your system of core beliefs so that this internal system is resilient. This rebuilt system must incorporate the reality of what has happened and the possibility of future traumas, ways to cope with those traumas, and how to live life in spite of the uncertainty of when new traumas may occur or what they will be like.

The city must have stronger building codes in order to create a more resilient infrastructure. The trauma survivor must have better core beliefs, so the assumptive world fits better with the real world that may be encountered while allowing for a successful life within this world. The city rebuilt will be an improved version. The person with a new understanding of how to survive and thrive will be improved as well. Posttraumatic growth is the process the trauma survivor goes through to attain this new level of strength and resilience.

Where You Stand in the Process

You may now be in one of many phases of this process of posttraumatic growth. You may be in the immediate aftermath of trauma, in a state of disbelief, wondering what happened to your life. You may be trying to apply your old system of core beliefs to a situation that has radically changed, and you may now find this system to be inadequate. You may have experienced trauma some time ago and are already in the process of recovery. You are thinking about what your system of core beliefs needs to be and how to arrive at a system that works for you. Or you may have already done substantial work in developing a new way to understand your world, your future, and yourself and have a greater sense of confidence that you will be able to cope with future traumas. The self-assessments in this chapter have already helped to clarify where you are in this process of posttraumatic growth.

Now that you have an idea about how much your thinking process is either in a state of intrusion or reflection, you can assess what you may be thinking about. What aspects of your core beliefs, or assumptions about the world, may be undergoing reconstruction? This next exercise focuses on which of your core beliefs are in the process of reexamination or perhaps are undergoing serious reconsideration for the first time in your life. The questions in the exercise are from Cann et al. (2009).

EXERCISE: A Self-Assessment of the Challenge to Your Core Beliefs

Please reflect upon your traumatic event. Then for each statement, circle the number that corresponds to the extent to which the event led you to seriously examine a core belief.

1. *Because of the event, I have seriously examined the degree to which I believe things that happen to people are fair.*

0	1	2	3	4	5
not at all	to a very small degree	to a small degree	to a moder- ate degree	to a great degree	to a very great degree

2. *Because of the event, I have seriously examined the degree to which I believe things that happen to people are controllable.*

0	1	2	3	4	5
not at all	to a very small degree	to a small degree	to a moder- ate degree	to a great degree	to a very great degree

3. *Because of the event, I have seriously examined my assumptions concerning why other people think and behave the way they do.*

0	1	2	3	4	5
not at all	to a very small degree	to a small degree	to a moder- ate degree	to a great degree	to a very great degree

4. *Because of the event, I have seriously examined my beliefs about my relationships with other people.*

0	1	2	3	4	5
not at all	to a very small degree	to a small degree	to a moder- ate degree	to a great degree	to a very great degree

5. *Because of the event, I have seriously examined my beliefs about my own abilities, strengths, and weaknesses.*

0	1	2	3	4	5
not at all	to a very small degree	to a small degree	to a moder- ate degree	to a great degree	to a very great degree

6. *Because of the event, I have seriously examined my beliefs about my expectations for my future.*

0	1	2	3	4	5
not at all	to a very small degree	to a small degree	to a moder- ate degree	to a great degree	to a very great degree

7. *Because of the event, I have seriously examined my beliefs about the meaning of my life.*

0	1	2	3	4	5
not at all	to a very small degree	to a small degree	to a moder- ate degree	to a great degree	to a very great degree

8. *Because of the event, I have seriously examined my spiritual or religious beliefs.*

0	1	2	3	4	5
not at all	to a very small degree	to a small degree	to a moder- ate degree	to a great degree	to a very great degree

9. *Because of the event, I have seriously examined my beliefs about my own value or worth as a person.*

0	1	2	3	4	5
not at all	to a very small degree	to a small degree	to a moder- ate degree	to a great degree	to a very great degree

Scoring: Here is how you can determine the degree to which you have experienced a challenge to your core beliefs.

Primary score: Add up the numbers you circled for items 1 to 9.

0–10 You have little core belief disruption.

11–24 You have some core belief disruption.

25–45 You have substantial core belief disruption.

Secondary score: Look for the core beliefs that you have been seriously examining at the level of a 4 or 5. How many are there, and what are they?

Core Belief Disruption and Growth

The previous assessment looked at how much you've been examining your core beliefs in the aftermath of trauma. There may be other particular beliefs that you have been reconsidering besides the nine core beliefs referred to here, but these nine are the general beliefs that tend to be shaken by the earthquake of trauma. They involve beliefs about yourself, the future, other people, and the way the world works.

It is important to consider both primary and secondary scores. A high score clearly indicates that you are reexamining your core beliefs, which can lead to posttraumatic growth. You may have a low primary score, indicating little core belief disruption but still have one or two beliefs on which you scored high. This indicates significant core belief disruption in a particular area. If you have any core beliefs that you have been seriously examining to a great degree or to a very great degree, you are likely in a process of reflection that can lead to posttraumatic growth.

Your Reconstruction Process

Reconstructing your belief system in the aftermath of trauma may be a difficult task. It may take months or, for some people, even years. This is because these beliefs are fundamental to who you are and they are put to use in almost all situations in life. To feel that life is understandable and that you know how to approach it, it's important to really check in with your core beliefs. We will return to considering these core beliefs

in succeeding chapters, as you develop new perspectives on how trauma has changed you, the meaning of your life, and the story of your life.

Which of your core beliefs is challenged may depend largely on the circumstances. For example, a situation where you were disappointed in how you behaved or you feel guilty about your actions may make you question your belief about your value or worth as a person. This was the case for one man we know who was unable to save a friend from drowning. His friend fell overboard after having a seizure, and the man felt that he should have been able to prevent his friend's death, even though the incident had happened in the dark early hours of the morning, and the friend had fallen into murky water. Despite his best efforts, the man could not locate his friend. Following the incident, he came to question his ability to handle an emergency and to exert all the effort necessary to help another person. Merely being reassured by others was not enough to decrease his guilt, and he had to reassess his capabilities in the aftermath of this death.

On the other hand, if you went through a trauma where someone close to you betrayed you, you may need to reexamine your core belief about your relationships with other people. Marital infidelity is an example of a betrayal that often causes people to reexamine their core beliefs in this area.

Redefining Trauma

You may be surprised to read that marital infidelity could be traumatic, as it does not involve being confronted with physical threat or death. However, we consider many events to be *potentially traumatic events* because of their possible effects on the core belief system. The challenging of these beliefs—or the need to develop a clear system of beliefs to make sense of the event or to make sense of how to live life going forward—is what constitutes trauma for many people. Trauma is in the eye of the traumatized. We have found that what is usually the most difficult part of these events is a core belief system that is not up to the task of understanding what has happened or how to go on with real confidence. One man we knew was being treated with life-threatening cancer. Rich said to him, “I imagine this may be the hardest thing you have been through.” The man said, “Actually, not. My divorce was much harder for me. That rocked my world.” By that, he meant that his sense of his own value, his relationships, and his future were all called into question. His cancer, on the other hand, did not challenge his core beliefs. He was not surprised by this illness, because he had a family history of cancer.

Posttraumatic Growth as a Route to Resilience

Posttraumatic growth is the reconstruction of your belief system into a new system that did not even exist in any substantial form in the past. With this process comes a more resilient person, a person more capable of managing the traumas of the future. This is not unlike seeing a city rebuilt to higher standards through new understandings of how earthquakes and other potential disasters can affect its structures.

In the next chapter, you will learn how to confront the challenges to your core beliefs and begin to find a firm basis for living a satisfying life in the aftermath of your trauma. The disruption to core beliefs is emotionally upsetting; it creates anxiety, anger, and confusion. You must have a way of dealing with these emotional aspects of core belief disruption, so you can think yourself through to a new set of core beliefs and develop confidence in your own ability to manage your emotions and thoughts. You will learn some skills that will allow you to engage in the process of posttraumatic growth, as you construct new core beliefs you can count on.