

The Parallel Pathways of Trauma

Human Experience

Overwhelming or High Stakes Events

Trauma

- What happened to me
- Actions I took
- Applies to both

PTSD
(Fear-Based Trauma)

“Events that happened beyond my control.”

Core Experience

- Fear, helplessness, horror
- Hyperarousal or shutdown
- “I am not safe.”

Common Pathways

- Direct life threat
- Witnessing death or severe injury
- Repeated exposure to danger
- Sudden catastrophic events
- Prolonged states of unpredictability
- I made a mistake that resulted in a terrifying event

Healing Focus

- Nervous system regulation
- Processing traumatic memories
- Reducing avoidance patterns
- Rebuilding a felt sense of safety
- Strengthening present-moment stability

Moral Injury

(Value-Based Trauma)

“Things that happened to me OR actions I took or failed to take.”

Core Experience

- Shame, anger, or betrayal from what was done to me
- Guilt, shame related to my actions
- Moral disorientation (loss of clarity about right and wrong)

Common Pathways

- Being harmed, violated, or assaulted
- Experiencing neglect, abuse, or moral betrayal in childhood
- Feeling betrayed by leadership, institutions, or trusted others
- Perpetrating harm
- Failing to prevent harm
- Witnessing moral transgressions
- Acting or existing under impossible moral constraints

Healing Focus

- Forgiveness of others (releasing resentment without excusing harm)
- Self-forgiveness (releasing global shame while taking responsibility)
- Moral Repair (naming and understanding what happened)
- Rebuilding Integrity (aligning present values and actions)
- Restoring Trust (self, others, and systems—with discernment)

PTSD Healing Focus

- What happened to me
- Actions I took*
- Applies to both

Nervous System Regulation

- Learning to recognize states of hyperarousal (fight/flight) and shutdown (freeze/collapse)
- Practicing grounding techniques to return to the present moment
- Using breath, movement, and sensory awareness to calm the body
- Building the ability to move between activation and relaxation more flexibly

Processing Traumatic Memories

- Safely revisiting overwhelming experiences in a structured and supported way
- Organizing fragmented memories into a coherent narrative
- Differentiating past events from present safety (“that was then, this is now”)
- Reducing the intensity of intrusive thoughts, images, and reactions

Reducing Avoidance Patterns

- Identifying patterns of avoidance that limit daily life
- Gradually approaching feared situations in manageable steps
- Re-engaging with people, places, and activities that have been avoided
- Expanding tolerance for discomfort without becoming overwhelmed

Rebuilding a Felt Sense of Safety

- Recognizing that the original threat is no longer present
- Developing internal signals of safety within the body
- Creating external environments that support stability and predictability
- Strengthening the ability to feel safe with others over time

Strengthening Present-moment Stability

- Anchoring attention in the present rather than the past
- Building routines that support consistency and predictability
- Increasing awareness of thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations
- Developing confidence in the ability to handle current challenges

* Generally, PTSD is a result of something that happened to you. But it can also be a result of something done unintentionally. For example, “I made a mistake under pressure” may stay primarily PTSD, but if it shifts into: “I should have known better”, “I failed my team”, or “I can’t trust myself” then it may also be in moral injury territory.

Moral Injury Healing Focus

- What happened to me
- Actions I took
- Applies to both

Forgiveness (of others)

- Releasing chronic resentment
- Separating justice from bitterness
- Reducing emotional entanglement
- Spiritual/existential trust

Self-Forgiveness

- Releasing ongoing self-punishment
- Taking responsibility without global shame
- Choosing forward-directed repair
- Understanding context without minimizing
- Allowing compassion toward the past self

Moral Repair

- Recognizing when harm was done to me without my responsibility
- Accepting appropriate responsibility (where applicable)
- Allowing healthy remorse (not toxic shame)
- Making amends where possible
- Honest acknowledgment of what happened
- Naming the moral conflict clearly
- Distinguishing behavior from identity
- Contributing forward in meaningful ways

Rebuilding Integrity

- Aligning daily actions with chosen values
- Clarifying present core values
- Defining “who I choose to be now”
- Integrating past experiences into a coherent life story
- Moving from self-condemnation to self-leadership

Restoring Trust

- Trust in self (I can recognize and respond to unsafe situations)
- Trust in others (safe reconnection)
- Trust in self (I can act according to my values)
- Trust in institutions (realistic discernment)
- Community reintegration and belonging