

CONVERSATIONS



— WITH —  
CAROLYN SPRING  
*transcribed*

## PODCAST #2 – RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE



by Carolyn Spring

*Hi there! I'm Carolyn Spring and welcome to my podcast where I talk about all things trauma. I dig into the nuts and bolts of trauma, how we can recover, what blocks us, and all things neuroscience-y – what actually goes on in the body and brain during and after trauma, especially from the perspective of evolutionary neurobiology. This podcast is for anyone who's experienced trauma, or knows someone who has, which is pretty much everyone. For more podcasts, blogposts, books and training check out my website at [carolynspring.com](http://carolynspring.com).*

Welcome to this episode – 'Recovery is possible'.

So if you've read anything I've written you'll have clocked on pretty quickly to the fact that I'm very strong on the fact that people can recover from trauma – from even the most appalling suffering. Firstly, because I've seen that change in my life. It's been unbelievable – complete transformation. I'm not sorted, but I am

transformed. And I know that I'm not anything special, the therapy I received wasn't anything special, and so if I can do it, anybody can. And secondly, because I think our default as human beings is to heal. It's this amazing miracle that we're alive in the first place – it's against all odds. And then if you look at the level of the cell, at all the incredibly complex things that go on every single second of every single day to keep us alive and functioning, it's remarkable. There's so much healing going on in our cells all the time – whole systems and procedures for clearing out the gunk, repairing damage, renewing our bodies. So when we talk about recovery from trauma, healing from it, we're not talking about a concept that is alien to nature. In fact, it's endemic to it. If we didn't have a healing thing going on by default, we'd all be dead. So that gives me a lot of hope.

Of course, though, I recognise that there are a lot of people who have been traumatised who don't ever achieve



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a significant level of recovery. And I wouldn't want to make recovery sound easy. It's an enormous task, especially when we're talking about the levels and types of trauma that have led to a dissociative disorder. But just because something is difficult doesn't mean it's impossible.

I think what we've been finding over the last twenty years or so is that the way we've approached healing trauma hasn't been helpful. We've basically had one of two models: firstly, a medication approach, which does nothing to heal the trauma, as it just suppresses the symptoms; and secondly, talking therapies. And we're really only at the beginning of understanding how to use talking therapies to resolve trauma. A lot of the way we've approached it to date hasn't been hugely effective and in some cases it has made things worse.

We've tended to think, based on Freud, that we need to talk about what happened to us and we need a big catharsis of emotion. We've taken on board the concepts of suppression and repression and we've thought that the problem is that we haven't felt our feelings, and we haven't talked about our trauma. And that's partly right. But to do that is also like pouring petrol on a fire when it comes to trauma. And so people haven't made progress and in many cases they've become worse.

Now that doesn't mean that people *can't* recover. It just means that we haven't got our approach right. And I think that's an important distinction to make, between the treatment and the person. If we think that *this person* cannot recover, then we're in trouble. But if we think, no *this approach* isn't very effective, then it's just a case of finding a better approach.

And, of course, as trauma survivors, we tend to personalise things, we blame ourselves. So when an approach isn't working, we think we're the problem. We think we're too damaged, too screwed up. We think there's something wrong with *us*. But if we can step back from doing that, we can maybe think instead, 'Hang on, maybe the therapy that I've been working at doesn't work. Maybe it's not me at all. Maybe we just need a different approach.'

I think that viewpoint is much more helpful, because it keeps us hoping. It keeps us actively looking for a solution. It's trial and error: we try something, it doesn't work, so we try something else. And we keep doing that until we find what does work. But if we think that the problem is us – who we intrinsically are as human beings – then we'll give up straightaway. Because you can't fix something that can't be fixed.

And unfortunately, a lot of people have had such a negative experience of mental health services, that they end



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up believing that they won't ever heal. They're stuck in the same symptoms, the same *suffering* for years and years and years and of course they lose hope. So then I come along and say, 'Hey, you know what? You can recover!' And they react. Of course they do. Makes perfect sense. Because it sounds like I'm lying, that I'm tricking them – or, worse still, that I'm mocking them. But of course, I'm not. I'm believing in them. I'm believing that their minds and their bodies *want to heal*, and that if we can find them the right support, with the right approach, then they will heal.

So ... is therapy the answer? Wouldn't it be great if I could just answer that simply and say 'yes'? But of course it's more complex than that. I think the right approach in therapy is priceless. The wrong approach can be catastrophic. But there are so many other variables too. You can't just go along and sit in a room with a therapist each week and they wave a magic wand and you're better. It's hard work – really, really hard work. It's like non-invasive brain surgery: you have to create a whole load of new neural networks (ways of thinking, habits, strategies for managing emotion, ways of viewing the world, ways of talking to yourself) and you have to prune old networks. That's hard work. It takes a lot of persistence. It takes time. It takes repetition. It takes effort. And a lot of people don't want to put in that effort.

And there are lots of reasons for that. Firstly, mainly, often I think it's because they simply don't understand what recovery looks like. We've got so many frameworks from a physical health model and sometimes I think we apply that. We think, 'Oh, I have cancer. I'll go for my appointment with the oncologist. I'll go for my chemotherapy. Something will be done to me, and hopefully that will work.' So it's a passive approach. We expect the treatment just to happen.

But recovery from trauma isn't like that. If we're going to use a physical health analogy at all, I'd say it's more like physiotherapy. I was going for physio for my back and for the first few weeks I'd spend an hour being stretched and pummelled and having soft tissue massage. And then I was given a load of exercises to do. And I didn't really do them. I thought the cure was in what happened during my hour's appointment. So I kept going, kept getting a bit of relief from this lovely lady twisting my body into weird shapes and digging away at deep muscles. And it would help for a few days, but then I'd need to go back. And she started saying, 'Are you doing your exercises?' And I'd do them occasionally, once or twice. But I started to make real progress when I started doing them every day, when I took them really seriously. She gave me specific exercises that would stretch key muscles – I wouldn't have known which exercises to do without her expertise, so



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I needed her support in that sense. But I still had to do the exercises.

And I think therapy can be a bit like that. It's not a perfect analogy, of course. But it's a bit like that. We have to do the work. We have to be willing to think differently about ourselves. For example, one of the biggest problems we often have as trauma survivors, I think, is self-hatred. There's almost always a total lack of self-compassion. So on the one hand we're trying to recover from being abused. But then on the other, we're continuing to abuse ourselves. So no matter how many times the therapist tells us that the abuse wasn't our fault, that we didn't deserve it, that message doesn't grow new neural networks. Because we're continuing to strengthen the old ones.

And the only way to actually change that is by actually changing it! You have to actually decide to stop abusing yourself. You have to actually choose to show yourself some compassion, and love, and care. And it sounds facile to say that 'You just decide to' but ultimately, yes, that's a huge part of it. And our big problem there is that we don't feel able to make that decision. We don't feel able to choose. We're so used to being powerless that we don't realise how much power we actually *do* have to learn new habits. We say, 'But there are just these thoughts that fire off in my head. Or I hear voices. Or there

are other parts of me who criticise me all the time.' And I completely get that. That's exactly where I was at: pure and utter self-hatred. I didn't hate anyone in the world – not even my abusers – like I hated myself.

What was key in changing this for me was having someone be consistently compassionate towards me. That was the impact of sitting in therapy, week in, week out, and someone being kind towards me. Having unconditional positive regard. Someone going 'ouch' every time I was critical of myself. Pointing out where I was giving myself a hard time. Suggesting self-care. And she just kept doing it. I didn't get it at first. But she just kept showing me compassion. She kept showing me a different way. And she talked about showing herself compassion, giving herself some grace, not beating herself up for her mistakes. And so it began to dawn on me, eventually, that there was a different way to live.

It was vitally important therefore that it was modelled to me. That's the first step. But the second step is to make a decision. To get to the point where you say, 'Okay, enough is enough. I want rid of these symptoms. I want rid of the trauma. I want rid of the abuse. So I need to stop abusing myself.' And I'd get to that point, where that's what I wanted to do, but then I'd feel powerless. In would come this torrent



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of abuse towards myself, and I would just crumple underneath it.

So I had to start small. I had to start by just noticing it, at first. Just realising that that was what was going on. Then distracting myself from it. So not starting on a great rant about myself, and sitting for hours hating myself, or self-harming in order to punish myself. But just trying to do something else instead. So rather than being part of the gang that is bullying the defenceless kid, it was like I had to decide to walk away. I had to decide not to throw a punch. And then gradually, over time – I guess I just got more and more outraged that there was this defenceless kid (that was me) being beaten up all the time. And my sense of injustice, and the need to put right what was wrong, came to the fore. And I started defending that kid. I started

saying no to the bullies. I changed my posture from slumped, defeated, passive submission. I straightened my shoulders. I lengthened my spine. I squared my jaw. And I started saying ‘no’ to self-abuse.

I got the fact that I can’t recover from abuse if I’m continuing to abuse myself. And then I began to change the way I was towards myself. And that made a huge difference. Absolutely massive.

So that’s all we have time for in this episode. Thank you for joining me. You can subscribe on Apple Podcasts, on Spotify, or you can listen direct from my website at [www.carolynspring.com/podcasts](http://www.carolynspring.com/podcasts).

Speak soon!

