



CONVERSATIONS



— WITH —  
CAROLYN SPRING  
*transcribed*

## PODCAST #16 – TRAUMA NEEDS A SOLUTION



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: 'Trauma needs a solution'

There's no doubt that trauma is a problem. I could talk for hours and even days about all the problems in my life that trauma has caused. And in fact when I first became properly aware of my trauma, when I had a massive overnight breakdown in my early thirties, it wasn't anything but a

problem. I thought I'd gone mad. I've said this many times, but I don't think I've ever really been able to properly communicate just what I mean by this. Nothing made sense to me. I was acting and behaving and thinking and feeling in ways that I couldn't control. I wanted to be happy, I wanted to be calm, I wanted to be fine. And no matter what I did, I couldn't be. I was losing time and switching out to what I now know are different parts of the personality. But I didn't know that then. I just knew that I didn't know what had been going on, and that other people were reporting that I'd been acting and speaking and behaving like a terrified child, hiding under the desk, totally distressed. I was self-harming in the middle of the night without remembering doing it. I was constantly trying to kill myself. I was overwhelmed with self-loathing. I was absolutely out of control, in complete crisis, and I didn't know why. The only way I had of framing it all was that I had 'gone mad'.



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And so, the only way I could make sense of all of it was that there was something terribly, terribly wrong with me – wrong with my brain (I was mentally ill, or mad) and wrong with me as a person (I was bad). Why couldn't I just be okay, be fine, be like other people, and get on and fulfil my responsibilities and be a reasonable human being again? What was wrong with me that I couldn't do any of that? I was only able to see it all in terms of it being a problem in ME.

Years later, I would now see this as both an artefact of trauma – because trauma and shame are intimately intertwined – and as an artefact of societal perspectives that I had just inculcated from growing up. Good people, normal people, behaved in certain ways. Bad people, mad people, behaved in other ways. I had moved from camp A to camp B. And this reinforced this lurking belief that I'd always had, that I was different, and that I was defective, and that actually, fundamentally, I was evil.

Needless to say, those frameworks of understanding didn't help me one bit to resolve trauma. And indeed, I soon found that as soon as I started to talking to people within a medical or professional context, there wasn't much hope – so it seemed – of me making the leap back into the realm of good people and normal people. Because I was ill – seriously so. I had some fragility, some vulnerability, some weakness of mind and weakness of character that meant that I couldn't

handle life. All the talk was along the lines of managing my symptoms, using medication to take the edge off, and learning to live with my condition. Oh, and by the way, here's a label from a psychiatric textbook to make you ever so sure that there is something fundamentally wrong with you as a person.

Fortunately, though, I ended up in counselling with someone who didn't know enough to know what she didn't know, and who was as naive and green as I was in terms of what was going on. And so, kind of wide-eyed and curious and receptive to new ideas and fresh meaning-making, we embarked together on a journey of figuring out what was going on for me. And pretty soon it became pretty obvious that I had suffered a hell of a lot of childhood trauma, some of it super-extreme, and all of it chronic and persistent and long-term. I both knew this, and definitely *hadn't* known this up until this point. In that sense, it wasn't 'new' information. It was just 'newly known' information. And so, I began to read everything I could about trauma, about child sexual abuse, about dissociative disorders, about neuroscience, about evolutionary neurobiology. And slowly bit by bit my symptoms, my experiences, began to make sense.

So I shifted fairly early on from a pathology perspective – whereby I believed there was something wrong



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with *me* – to a trauma perspective, whereby I believed that something had *happened* to me. And that my brain and body had actually responded entirely logically to those events. And that actually my brain and body were in fact just trying to keep me safe. Bit by bit, the realisation dropped into my head that my response to trauma was to try to be safe. And that all of my symptoms made sense in the light of that single, core, organising principle. *Of course* I was hyperaroused all the time – I was ready for action, ready to fight or flee from danger. *Of course* I had flashbacks continually – not only was my brain trying to make sense of what had happened to me, but it was also perpetually warning me of danger and trying to get me to avoid it. So, *of course* I was triggered by sights and sounds and smells and pretty much anything that reminded me of the original trauma – my brain was telling me to be careful and persuading me to give this reminder a wide berth. *Of course* I had different parts of the personality – that too was an attempt to survive the overwhelm of trauma, of pushing out of consciousness what was too unbearable to know and to feel. It had been adaptive for me to not be fully aware of – to push into amnesia and other parts of the self – the fact that I was dependent for safety and survival on the very person who was also abusing me. My child brain couldn't cope with that paradox, that 'fear without solution', so I became the child who was abused, and the child who was never abused. It all made perfect sense.

What I also began to learn was that trauma needs a solution. We're not simply distressed by upsetting events. Our brain and body instead adapt to danger. They try to survive. They're trying, somehow, to be safe. And so trauma needs a solution. It's not enough, as I had been told, simply to suppress these symptoms and try to learn to manage it. I *had to* find a solution, and in fact that's exactly what my brain and body were doing too. They were trying to keep me safe by getting me to avoid anything that was triggering. And that worked as a short-term solution. But the long-term solution was actually to *be safe*. Like properly, *actually safe* – not just avoid anything that reminded me of potential danger. Of course we can never fully 100% guarantee safety in this world – being raped just before the pandemic taught me that – but nonetheless the body and brain are always *seeking* safety. Trauma had taught me that there is *nothing* I can do to keep myself except to avoid. But actually there are far more options on the table, and one of the biggest things I had to do, at a fairly early stage, was to put boundaries in with some of the people who had abused me, to deny them access to me – either to me literally and physically, or psychologically, with manipulation and lies. I had to create an actual life and lifestyle of safety around myself.

And I wasn't used to this. Trauma teaches us that we are helpless to act in the face of danger. But recovery from trauma



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involves *learning* to act, learning to take steps, learning to start to find and create the solutions. The symptoms of trauma aren't just there to make our lives a misery. They're there to provoke us to action – to *do something* because the alternative is unbearable distress. Society teaches us that we can instead suppress that distress with medication or other mind-numbing substances, including food and entertainment, or even with self-harm. But the distress of trauma is meant to drive us towards a solution.

And what I began to understand was that this solution is in completing a cycle or a sequence of natural, in-built responses to trauma that have evolved in us over millions of years. In nature, and in our evolution, life-threat is normal. We live amongst predators, amongst bears and snakes. Life has never been safe. For us as hominins to come down out of the trees, to walk bipedally, upright, to roam across the savannah – that involved a lot of risk. A lot. So trauma isn't a 21st century phenomenon. Life-threat is nothing new. We're actually just *so safe*, in relative terms, now in the 21st century that we think it's an unusual thing to experience a threat to our life. But in evolutionary terms it was perhaps an everyday event. And the body and brain have evolved to be able to deal with that. Our problem now in the 21st century is that we've forgotten how.

But the basic premise remains the same. After detection of threat, we respond with fight or flight, with mobilised, with active responses. And if they don't work, we switch at a basic neurobiological level to immobilisation, to freeze. That's the realm of trauma, when we experience life-threatening powerlessness, and we are rendered helpless and immobile in the face of a predator or an event that we don't have the capability of defending ourselves against. If we do escape – which was never a certainty when we shared living spaces with bears – then like all mammals and indeed most vertebrates, we need to recover from that experience to get back into daily life mode again. In my terms, we need to go through two distinct phases: re-regulation and integration.

Re-regulation is all about re-balancing, soothing or calming, our nervous system again. It's about expressing our emotions, distress-signalling to summon help from our tribe. It's about shaking it out, it's the need to feel it to heal it, crying and expressing our distress and letting those emotions run through us, until we're able to calm again back into the green zone of feeling safe and settled. Now, this is a phase that we wish we didn't have to go through, and indeed society encourages us to short-circuit, because it's so uncomfortable for everyone involved. We don't want to see people distressed. But if you're going to heal it to feel it, there's a lot



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of distress that needs to be worked through.

And then the integration phase is where we make sense of what's happened to us. We tell our story – because in evolutionary terms it's important for us to sit around the campfire and pass on the knowledge of our experience to our other tribe-members. It's important for the whole tribe that we know where the bears attacked us, which parts of the river they were at, how many there were, how we escaped. Talking about our trauma is not self-indulgent moaning, as many people make us think it is. It's an integral part of how we've evolved as *homo sapiens* – it's a way of the whole tribe surviving.

And so, in this integration phase, we make sense of what happened, we establish it not just in our memory but in the memory of our entire tribe, we learn from it, and we decide what to do about it. Do we need a hunting party? Do we need to set traps down by the river? Do we need to avoid that part of that river forevermore? Do we need to remember to take spears with us every time we go out to get water? Yes, a bad thing happened – but look, we survived, we've told others, we've learned from it and we've got a plan of action for the way forwards. When all of that has been accomplished, *then* we can move on with our life.

That's one of many reasons why it's so ridiculous when people expect us prematurely to 'move on' and 'get over' our trauma, and put it behind us. Yes, we *do* need to do those things and we *want* to do those things – who doesn't want to move on from suffering? But there's a process to go through, there's a neurobiological sequence to follow, and we can't short-circuit it. If there's no safe tribe to return to, if no-one is sat around the campfire and is willing to listen to us, if as an entire tribe we don't make a plan to go hunt the bears, then don't be surprised when we're still 'making a fuss'. It's in our genes to do so.

So, through all this kind of understanding, in the years after my breakdown, I began to develop a real shift of mindset. There isn't anything 'wrong' with me – I'm not ill or faulty or bad or wrong. The symptoms of trauma are not just something I need to learn to live with, and manage. Instead, trauma needs a solution. We need safety, we need soothing, and we need to make meaning. Or in other terms, we need to get safely back to camp, back to our tribe, with the bears fenced out; we need to re-regulate our nervous systems, to soothe and calm and tend to our wounds; and we need to sit around the campfire and make meaning and tell our stories and make a plan as to what, with our tribe, we'll do going forwards. That's how trauma heals.



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Trauma needs a solution. If trauma has rendered me powerless, then a good starting point is to understand that, to see how learned helplessness manifests in my life, to understand that every time I say 'I can't' in an angry, reactive way then that's probably trauma speaking. But then the next step is to be re-empowered. I need autonomy. I need to become master of my own destiny. I need to take charge, to decide who *I* am and what *I* want, and to be able to erect clear boundaries against people who would harm me. I need to develop the right within myself to like what I like and hate what I hate, to *be* who I am and not who my abusers wanted me to be.

If trauma rendered me immobile and stuck in the survival mode of doing nothing – staying safe by staying still – then I can appreciate that and be thankful for that, and acknowledge its importance. But then I need to move forwards into learning to be safe – *really, properly, effectively safe* – by *acting*. I need to mobilise again. I need to *do*.

Probably one of the most helpful questions that I was ever asked, a phrase that I was hit with over and over again, was when I was describing my situation, my symptoms, my stuckness, my struggles, and the challenge came: 'So what are you going to do about it?' At first, I used to be offended. Didn't the person asking it realise how hard life was? I wanted their understanding, their empathy, their support – not their

challenge! Sometimes I was outright offended by it. I'd complain that they were trying to fix me. But they weren't. They were trying to help me see that we respond to the freeze response of trauma by *unfreezing*. We respond to the do-nothing survival response of tonic immobility in trauma by doing something.

Eventually I began to understand that my resistance to having my trauma 'solved' was because I felt like I was simply being asked to 'get over it' and just 'move on'. But there's a big difference between our trauma being dismissed and our trauma being 'solved'. Because I'm not talking here about any kind of magic-trick solution. I'm not talking about positive self-talk that simply says, 'I won't be scared by the presence of bears anymore! I won't! I'll be brave and strong and fearless!' I'm talking about doing everything that needs to be done in our lives to actually *rid* ourselves of the threat from the bears, or to equip and arm ourselves so that we are capable and competent enough to defend ourselves even if we are attacked. So much of what people think of in terms of trauma recovery is simply wishful thinking, of denial and rah-rah toxic positivity. It's saying that the only problem you have with the bears is inside your own head – so really the only problem you have is that you have a broken head, and if you could just think differently you would be fine.



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But I'm much more into the reality of the danger and the threat that the bears *do* actually pose to us. And the very real changes that have gone on, structurally and anatomically, in our brains, in our nervous systems, to manage that threat. We can't just think differently and all is well. It's a process of change, of restructuring our nervous system. It takes time. It takes effort. It takes perseverance.

Now, the film *Jurassic Park* absolutely terrified me when I saw it (even though at the time I was in my twenties), possibly because the primitive fear was so visceral in me – of threats from predators – and perhaps because some of the reactions, of the kids in particular, struck a chord. There's a scene, I think in the kitchen, when the kids are being stalked by (I think) velociraptors, and they're hiding, in freeze, stuck still, trying not to draw attention through motion. If we stay still, we stay safe – we have a chance of survival. That's what so much of trauma is like. *Stay still to stay safe*. So that embeds into us in life. 'What are you going to do about that?' I was being asked, and my genuine, somatic response was to say, 'I'm going to do absolutely nothing at all! I'm staying right here, in freeze! The velociraptors are at the other end of the kitchen counter and if I move – if I *do anything* – I will die.'

What I had to realise though was that that was an adaptive response while my own life's velociraptors were stalking me. But that they're not there anymore *now*. There comes a point, when the immediate threat has receded, when we have to actually make a run for it. The kids had to get out of the kitchen and back to the adults – back to the safety of the tribe, to the camp. And that's what it felt like for me, that there were times when I realised that I had an opportunity now to get to safety, and to do so I had to make a run for it. I had to move. I had to act. I had to stop trying to survive *just* by being still.

In practice, it wasn't quite as dramatic as scenes from *Jurassic Park*. It involved, somewhat more prosaically, in having first and foremost a daily movement practice. I'm not going to use the word 'exercise' as that would be an exaggeration for anything like what I do, and because the word 'exercise' is so off-putting for so many people. And in evolutionary terms, no-one on the savannah was working out on a Peloton or doing circuits. Most hunter-gatherer communities seemed to have spent just a large part of their day moving relatively slowly – walking, gathering, cooking, doing stuff – rather than working out at a gym. For sure there would have been high intensity interval sessions when out hunting, but not a lot in the space of a week, and they gathered a lot more than they hunted.



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So most of the time they were moving gently, slowly, steadily – but they *weren't* in freeze. Their lifestyles didn't allow for it, whereas ours, unfortunately, do.

And in my freeze response after trauma, I became more and more stuck in complete motionlessness. It was like I just never wanted to move. Moving felt dangerous. Staying still felt safe. And so my life deteriorated into a narrower and narrower space. I rationalised that I didn't want to go out because 'out' was stressful and scary and overstimulating, and that was at least part of it. But it was also because *moving* itself – moving off the sofa, moving out of bed – felt too risky. I was like the kids in Jurassic Park huddling at the end of the kitchen unit. If I move, I'll die. So let's stay still.

And as I say, that's a great strategy when a velociraptor is actually sniffing around you. But you can't live your life like that. At some point you have to move. Now I tricked my brain into doing it by getting a dog. She needed to walk, so I needed to walk with her. It was a forcing function. And it helped a lot – it still does. On those days when it feels dangerous and overwhelming to crawl out from under the duvet, the need to move – to satisfy someone else's or something else's needs, rather than my own – was enough to do it. For years now I have had a consistently daily movement protocol, simply because I have a dog.

And from that initial daily physical movement I progressed onto psychological movement. This is what we often call 'motivation'. It's the oomph we need to do things. And doing things – 'What are you going to do about that?' – is so integral to moving out of the powerlessness and freeze of trauma. What I began to realise was that in danger mode, we stay still, we freeze because our focus is on the predator. If we're completely still, we won't be seen, and we'll be better able to hear where the predator is. It's right there in our evolutionary development. But in order to live life again, in order to thrive and not just survive, we need to shift from danger mode to daily life mode. We need to shift from merely avoiding to approaching.

Now, the approach/avoid paradigm one is a key one in psychology. It explains so much. In trauma, we get stuck in a conflict of approach and avoid impulses: we both want to escape the abuser, but if they're an attachment figure we also want to approach them for nurturance, for safety and for support. That's what leads to the development of dissociation as a survival strategy and in attachment terms disorganised attachment. And again, evolutionarily, we see this conflict in all vertebrates. If we stay still, we might be safer, but we'll starve. We need to move, to go out, to get resources, to feed (and also to breed). But that's dangerous. That movement increases



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our risk of predation. So there's constant battle, this constant balance, between the need to reduce risk by staying still, and the need to reduce the risk of starvation by moving towards resources.

And I see this playing out in all sorts of contexts for us as trauma survivors. If we stay stuck in freeze, nothing bad happens. But nothing *good* happens either, and slowly we emotionally starve to death. I actually think that mental health services, in the way that they're set up, often make things worse by enabling us to stay stuck still in freeze, whilst throwing us scraps – just enough, just the tiniest bit of support and help, so that we stay alive. It's not enough to help us resolve the trauma and move out of freeze. But it also encourages us to stay still, waiting for the next scrap.

In evolutionary terms, it's our hunger, it's our risk of death by starvation, that motivates us to overcome the fear of trauma. It's one survival need taking precedence over another. At times my worst days have been when things are bad, but not quite bad enough for me to do anything about it. Sometimes it's when I'm in huge distress but I've got just about enough anaesthetic from medication or self-harm or ineffective support, that I'm not motivated to change. I'm numbed down into accepting things as they are, because I'm not yet starving. And in those circumstances, I don't have the motivation to make a

run for it. But again, in evolutionary terms, we've got to make a decision and a choice to take our focus solely off the bears in the bushes and put them on the berries beyond the bushes.

Trauma will tell us that our imminent risk – of death by predation – matters more than our long-term wellbeing – death by starvation. So it's important that we deploy our forward-thinking, future-imagining front brain to make daily choices to redress the balance. It's important that we set our focus on the berries rather than just on the bears – on approach rather than just avoid. What this means in practice ties in with another psychological concept, which is selective attention. And that basically means that we see what we're looking for. It's that thing that when you buy a blue Ford Focus, suddenly you see all the other blue Ford Focuses as well. You didn't realise there were so many – you hadn't seen them because you weren't looking for them.

And that's what plays out in terms of the berries, the resources, the things that will feed us and nourish us and help us build a better future. We don't see them because we're not looking for them. I bet those kids in Jurassic Park (had they been real) I bet they didn't see the pots and pans in the kitchen, the biscuits in the pantry because they weren't looking for them. They were focused – their vision was entirely focused – on the velociraptors. Of course it was! The



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same with us. We can't see what we're not looking for.

And that has been a game-changer for me in terms of setting intentions and goals, and I've made so much progress by doing so. I set goals now in my life, in my work, in my therapy. I focus my vision on the berries and how to get to them – I do that consciously, deliberately, as a daily practice, because if I don't then all my brain looks for is the bears. When I set my goal and my intention to finding a new therapist to work with, my trauma-focused brain warned me that it'll be impossible and that I can't trust anyone anyway, and what's the point, and it won't work, and I can't afford it, and there's no-one who works with trauma, and I don't have the time. That's what our brains and bodies do after trauma – they warn us of everything that's negative in the world, to keep us safe. They get us to be aware of the risks and the pitfalls and the dangers and the things that might go wrong if we do anything.

And so, I adjust the cognitive bias by focusing on the berries, and figuring out a way of getting to them. I have to do this consciously, deliberately, as an act of the will – a decision to get out from behind the kitchen counter and make a run for the door. So I'm not negating the reality of bears (or velociraptors!) in my environment. There *are* berries, there *are* resources, there's a life worth living, and that's what I'm striving for. It's

essential for life that I get there. And, at the very same time, I'm aware that there are bears in the bushes. It's both/and. Not one or the other. Not *all* danger and risk. And not *all* resources and reward. Both/and. Trauma says there are *only* bears in the bushes. I've had to learn to correct that bias by *also* focusing on the berries, and moving towards them.

And what I learned about this, that really helped me, was something called 'pathways thinking'. Pathways thinking says that there might be one goal, but there are many paths towards it. So if the path you're on is blocked, you can back up and you can try a different way. People with high levels of psychological flexibility are able to adjust their approach when it's thwarted. Most of us after trauma take the blockage to mean that we're not supposed to get there in the first place. That we're not worthy. That we don't deserve it. And again, that's the freeze response speaking. It's saying, 'You're safer when you're still and when you do nothing.' If the obvious route out of the kitchen is blocked by the velociraptors, then trauma will suggest in no uncertain terms that we stay still. But pathways thinking, which is operational when we're mobilised for action rather than immobilised in inaction, says, 'Try a different path.'

And what I found particularly helpful was understanding that the psychological flexibility of pathways thinking isn't something that we're



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born with. In fact, it's something that trauma squashes out of us. But we can develop it. And the way to develop it is by having a goal in the first place. If you haven't committed to going out and seeking berries, then you won't develop pathways thinking to getting there. We get better at pathways thinking the more committed we are to reaching new approach-based goals.

So trauma needs a solution. We've got to set ourselves the goal of finding that solution, and ironically even by doing so that's *part of the solution*. Recovery from trauma isn't getting over some big, bad, scary, distressing event. It's about moving out of immobilisation and freeze, moving back into acting, doing, trying, approaching, and not avoiding. It's about realising that there are berries to be had, and we need to figure out how to go get them, rather than for the rest

of our life just trying to avoid the bears in the bushes.

So, I hope that's been helpful. For me, it's always helpful to stand back from our experiences and our symptoms and see *how* we're thinking, not just *what* we're thinking. For me, it's about recognising the little cognitive biases that trauma sets us up with and then working a way around to balance them. Otherwise, we'll believe that the problem is *us*, that the problem is *in* us, and if we believe that then it'll be really hard to have any hope for the future. But if we see that the problem is trauma, and that trauma needs a solution – and that we are capable of the goal of finding that solution – then that changes everything. It certainly has for me.

So, I hope that helps, at least a little, and speak soon!

