



# BLOG

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## WHY CAN'T I JUST GET OVER MY TRAUMA?



by Carolyn Spring

'If I could just get over it, I would,' I say, and I'm trying not to sound irritated or hurt but I'm not quite sure what emotion my face is displaying and my throat is tight and my fists are clenched and really I'd rather not be here, and neither am I convinced that I'm a good enough actor to hide all of this.

Jennifer has been lecturing me for a good five minutes on how I really don't need to be affected by what happened to me when I was a child and that if I continue to react with flashbacks, nightmares and chronic pain, it's my choice to do so and I really can't expect any sympathy.

She's doing it with a smile on her face and her voice is light and tinkly like a goldfinch, but I'm more than a little taken aback. Because, as I've just explained to her, if I *could* get over it, I *would*.

There's a strange kind of logic in the mind of people like Jennifer. On the whole, they are well-meaning. They want to see us 'well'. They are bothered by our symptoms, and at least they acknowledge them, which is more than most people do. The problem is that they don't understand the back brain, domain of trauma, with its automatic, survival-based reactions, and so they assume, simplistically, that we can solve it all with our decision-making front brain.

'It's like dieting,' she had said in another conversation. 'If you really want to lose weight, you will. You just have to make that decision.'

I wanted to argue that studies show that it's not a simple formula of calories in versus calories out, but Jennifer is having none of it. In her mind, if I want to lose weight, I just need to want to, and do it.



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If I want to be rid of trauma, I just need to want to, and do it. And I need to stop making excuses.

In Jennifer's mind, the fact that I've tried, many times, for many years, just shows that I haven't tried hard enough. The only conclusion I can, therefore, come to is that I am lazy and defective. (No wonder she's irritated with me). And being (apparently) lazy and defective, my shame increases and so do my symptoms. It's a vicious circle.

Following Jennifer's numerous 'pep talks', I would lie in bed on a morning and decide that today was the day when I would 'get over it'. *Come on*, I would say to myself, firmly, albeit lacking conviction. *Let's just stop it. Let's get up and get on. I don't need to feel like this. I'm just making it up anyway. I need to stop attention-seeking and just get over myself. I've had enough of being like this. I just want to get back to normal. So today I will.*

Sometimes I would be able to pretend to myself that my heart wasn't really racing at 120 beats per minute and that the diarrhoea was just a reaction to what I'd eaten last night. I'd force myself into productivity and get on for a good couple of hours, because I was 'putting the past behind me' and 'moving on with my life.' *No point dwelling on the past*, I would say to myself as another flashback swept in from the side.

Naturally, I couldn't sustain this unreality for very long. The pain, the vomiting, the

loss of consciousness, the switching ... It was real, and my denial of it was making things worse, not better.

'You just have to be firm with yourself,' Jennifer explained when I described my symptoms. What she didn't explain was what 'being firm' meant, or how it could possibly help. I'd been 'firm' with myself all my life. What actually was going to help was some self-compassion, not more self-abuse. But she didn't know that because, like most people, she didn't know the first thing about trauma.

She thought that trauma is about being upset about something. Stop being upset about it (be firm with yourself) and move on. It's not entirely bad advice for minor life mishaps, like catching a bollard with the car door or someone forgetting your birthday. It's woefully inadequate for trauma. Because it doesn't take into account that 'being upset' is low on the list of impacts that trauma has. In fact, due to the very nature of trauma, we may feel no upset at all. We may not even remember the trauma in the first place, as amnesia protects us from its mutilated awfulness. How then do you 'get over it', if you can't even remember it? How do you stop being upset about something when you don't feel anything at all?

Trauma fundamentally changes the way our brains and bodies work. It is an adaptation to what our minds perceive – outside of conscious thought, awareness or choice – to be an imminent threat to our life or physical integrity. Trauma



is a cascade of animalistic responses wired deep into our neurobiology with millions of years of evolutionary survival imperative at its core. We can no more stop ourselves reacting to trauma than we can stop our hair growing.

Trauma manifests in our bodies and the primitive parts of our brain. Our 'front brain' – the thinking, intelligent, reflective, creative, choosing human brain that we tend to think of as our whole brain – is sidelined. Trauma resides instead primarily in our back brain – the ancient, survival-based, instinctive, automatic brain that operates largely outside of conscious awareness.

This is why we can't just 'get over' trauma. We can't just make a decision: the front-brain makes decisions. But trauma isn't in the front brain. It's like deciding to slow our digestion, or stop our heart beating, or release more insulin: we can't, consciously, do it.

It's the uncontrollability of the impacts of trauma that makes it so scary. It makes us feel helpless before it. If it's out of our control, implanted deep in our unreachable back brain, outside of conscious awareness, outside of choice, does this then mean that we cannot recover from trauma?

Not at all.

But we don't recover from trauma by just deciding to 'get over it'. We have to rewire our brain and nervous system:

this is the work of psychotherapy. Not to talk endlessly and woefully about what happened, again and again and again, feeling sorry for ourselves and casting ourselves as the helpless and immutable victim – which is what most people seem to imagine we are doing when are going for some kind of mental health 'treatment'. But a slow, steady process of retraining our body and brain to come out of the amber or red zones, of autonomic hyper- or hypo-arousal, back to the felt sense of safety of green. It's about bringing parts of our front brain back online after the dropped connections of trauma. It's about reframing, and mentalising, and developing 'earned secure attachment'. It's about working at the edges of our window of tolerance to bring unprocessed traumatic memory back into awareness so that the hippocampus, our brain's 'librarian', can tag it as over. It's about developing accurate 'neuroception', the ability to feel safe again in our bodies, after the unremitting 'battle-stations' response of our neurobiology.

Treatment for trauma is lots of things, but it's not something you do on a Monday morning because you choose to. It's a meticulous process of deeply-wired brain change, not a decision.

We can't just decide not to be traumatised, just as we can't decide for our heart rate to slow. What we can do, however, is create the right conditions for it to happen – sitting down, not walking up a mountain; in therapy, rather



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than in denial; committing to processing our past, not trying to ignore it.

A few years on from my early encounter with Jennifer – right when I was in the thick of therapy, when things were really starting to change but at the same time it felt that I was buried alive under the pain and the mess of it all – I bumped into her at the supermarket.

She smiled kindly but superciliously.

‘How are you doing?’ she said, leaning in towards me, close enough for me to smell her perfume. ‘Are you feeling better nowadays – you know, getting over things?’

I never know what to say to that kind of question. The honest answer, that week, would have been, ‘No, I’m feeling much, much worse. But it’s a good thing, because I’m *feeling*. I’m not pushing it all away all the time. I’m not dissociating from it. I’m not separating out my feelings from conscious awareness. I’m not numbing them with prescription painkillers and too much wine. I’m not pretending that bad stuff didn’t happen. Instead I’m learning how to deal with it. I’m working it through. I’m reframing what happened to me and realising that it wasn’t my fault. I’m putting the blame back where it belongs, rather than believing the lie that I was abused because I was bad. I’m learning about trauma and what it does to your brain and how that’s not my fault either. I’m learning how to handle triggers and I’m

getting to know the various dissociated parts of myself. It’s a hell of a ride, and right now things feel pretty dire. So, no, I’m not feeling better at all. But thanks for asking.’

But of course I didn’t.

Instead I just smiled and said, ‘Yes, thank you.’

‘Aw that’s good to hear,’ she said, with her eyes almost tight shut in a patronising smirk. I curled my toes into the ground in an effort to subdue the urge to punch her.

We chatted for a few minutes about everything I wasn’t interested in, until normal life overwhelmed me with its tedium, and we started to make our moves.

‘It’s so lovely to see you,’ Jennifer said, in a way that made me feel like a shabby painting. ‘I’m so glad to see you’re putting the past behind you and moving on with your life.’

The words were out before I knew it, but at least I had enough control to mask them with levity: ‘Oh, it’s not so much about putting the past behind you,’ I said, ‘as embracing the fact that you survived your past. It’s about accepting that the past is real, rather than denying that it happened. It’s about recognising that we’ve been affected by the past, and not being ashamed of that.’



She stared at me with her mouth slightly open and her eyeballs rammed to the edges of their sockets.

*I've just broken the rules*, I thought to myself as a slight fizz of panic chased up my spine. *I'm not supposed to talk back.*

Old habits die hard.

'Okay, well, take care, and hope to see you again soon,' Jennifer said, and walked off quickly.

*Here's the problem*, I thought to myself. *I had the trauma to deal with, and then I had people's expectations of how to deal with the trauma to deal with.* And it occurred to me, as it often did, that it was mainly the non-traumatised who

had these expectations. People who had been traumatised were usually too busy trying to find the answers for themselves.

My hands were quivering and I suddenly felt a great pit of hunger in my stomach. *It's okay*, I said to myself, as I had been learning to. *It's okay. You just stood up for yourself.*

My mouth turned upwards into a smile and a little ray of hope warmed me on the inside. *You can't just 'get over' trauma because you decide to*, I thought to myself. *But you can recover from it. There's a difference.*

And I walked on to find some mayonnaise. ●

