



CONVERSATIONS



— WITH —
CAROLYN SPRING
transcribed

PODCAST #5 – LEARNING TO ENJOY LIFE



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.

Welcome to this episode – 'Learning to enjoy life'

So, I want to talk in this podcast about learning to enjoy life, which really is diametrically opposite to the state of trauma we often experience. One of the best, yet disarmingly simple questions, I've ever been asked was shortly after my

breakdown in 2005. This person was being friendly, trying to get to know me, and they said to me, 'So what do you do when you're not working? What do you like to do in your spare time?' And their question completely freaked me out. Because I didn't have a clue what to say. I didn't do *anything* when I wasn't working. I had no hobbies, no interests, no life. I had never made space in my life for it. I had never had that level of self-care. And really it took me a number of years to see hobbies and interests as a part of self-care. It's basically asking the question of who we are when we're not striving, or doing, or achieving, or giving, or learning, or loving. When we get stripped back, when we have space just to be us, who are we?

So how would I answer that question now? Who am I now? And actually, I'm a very different person, with a different answer to when I was first asked that!



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reversing adversity

www.carolynspring.com

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Over the intervening years I've made it a priority to develop a sense of who I am and who I want to be. I began to give myself time and space to be who I am. So I started small. I asked the question: what did I like doing when I was a kid? Because it seemed to me that as children we naturally gravitate to the things that interest us, the things we want to do. The world is more set up for us like that. As adults, it's harder, because there aren't after-school clubs and no-one is expecting us to find out what we like. We get pants and socks and drills and smellies for our birthdays, not things related to 'play'.

So as a child, I was always outside, whenever I could be. And I was always playing football. Or reading about football. Or watching football. Or talking football. It was my all-consuming passion. Back then, in the seventies, it was quite unusual, even 'weird', for a girl to be sooo interested in football. In fact, I didn't know any other girls who were even vaguely interested in football. But for me, it was my overriding passion. I supported Manchester United and my hero was Bryan Robson. Pretty much my entire childhood fantasy life revolved around United and Captain Marvel, which was Bryan Robson's nickname. And every opportunity I had, I would be playing football with my mates, or failing that, I'd just play on my own. I loved other sports too, but nothing came close to my passion for football.

I then got to play properly at University. It was the first opportunity I'd ever had to play in a team. It just didn't exist in school or anywhere else. So day one of term one of year one at College, I sought out the women's football team and joined. And I worked my way up and was playing in the end for the University, for the Blues' team.

I stopped playing though when I injured my back just before I left University. My back never healed properly and I never played again, which was really sad. I still loved football but I was too poor after university to be able to afford Sky Sports and watch it, and then once I got married my then husband wasn't into sport at all, and I was incredibly busy fostering multiple small children, so I kept an eye on the results and occasionally – very occasionally – I'd watch Match of the Day. But I guess I just accepted that this is what adult life was like and that I had to grow up and not have any interests any more.

... which is kind of sad, and I think that's what it's like for a lot of people, especially compulsive caregivers and martyrs, like I was. You often have to plan in time for yourself and if you're too busy looking after everyone else, as many abuse survivors are, then your own needs just fall off the cliff. And that's what I had to correct.



I actually felt deeply ashamed for my emptiness: I felt like a cheap Easter egg. Once you get through the thin outer layer, there's actually nothing on the inside. And it was something that I battled with a bit in therapy. Eventually one of the therapists I worked with said, 'It sounds to me like you need to get Sky Sports.' It was a throwaway comment that led to a series of arguments with my then husband! Because we had very little money and with his disdain for sport, to start with, he just couldn't see the point. It felt reckless and extravagant. But eventually I 'won' the argument, although it was years before I stopped feeling guilty. But we got Sky Sports and I remember watching the first match after the Sky box arrived. It was a Champions League match and Wayne Rooney scored a hat-trick. It was his Champions League debut, I think. And I felt like I'd died and gone to heaven! It was just the most delicious feeling that I had done something for myself, and I wanted to keep pinching myself to check that I wasn't dreaming. The guilt was terrible though. There was even a certain amount of self-harm that went with it to start with, to punish myself, to reestablish the status quo. But eventually I got used to it and that was the start – the start of a journey, really.

Because it's one thing to watch a football match and start reading the football gossip pages on BBC Sport. But it's another to begin to develop a confident,

self-assured, not-guilty sense of, 'This is who I am and this is what I enjoy.'

I think it's such a battle because it's one of the many things that abuse does to you. You grow up having to look after other people's feelings, whilst yours don't matter. It's not just that they don't matter a bit – but they are trampled all over. They are destroyed. What you want is not to be abused, not to be hurt, but instead to be loved. But you don't get that; you get the opposite. So you learn to squash down your wants and desires. And on top of that there's the shame, the deep sense you grow up with that you're bad and toxic and faulty and wrong. That you don't deserve anything good. And on top of that, the world of play and creativity and fun and laughter and enjoyment is a million miles away. You're just trying to survive. All the things you long for and wish for – what's the point? They'll just get taken away or ruined. Or if you're groomed with gifts and sweets or whatever then everything is poisoned. Every good thing is contaminated with a sense that you've been bought. You don't trust good things. They're too reminiscent of what happened before or after the good thing. So you don't want good things.

You don't ever believe that you can have anything good without there being strings attached. And your core sense of yourself is that you're 'bad'. That sounds kind of facile, and I don't really know how



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to put it into words. You justify your existence by looking after everyone else, by being super-good. You become a compulsive caregiver. Because that was a way of trying to keep yourself safe, too. If you lived with your abuser, or your abuser was volatile, then it was always in your best interests to make people happy, to do what they want, to serve them, to look after them, to soothe their emotions. You learn to be very attentive to other people, to try to control their emotional reactions. And so you totally switch off from your own needs and focus just on other people's.

So there's no room for your own enjoyment, and that's pretty much where I was at when I had my breakdown. I didn't have time or space to enjoy myself. I didn't even want to. In a way, it was too painful: it reminded me of everything I hadn't had. So when someone asked me what I did when I wasn't working, what I was into, I literally had no idea what they were talking about. I just had this big empty hole that was me. And I felt deeply ashamed of that.

Nowadays though I'm pretty much into everything! I'm like a kid on Christmas Eve every single day. Because there's so much to do and to enjoy and to experience. As my health has been improving, it's been opening up all sorts of doors because it's allowed me to do more. As well as football ... well, there's every other form of sport as well! I

like probably 90% of sports! Formula 1, cricket, tennis, swimming, boxing, cycling, American football, athletics, golf ... I'll watch any of those. I have to limit myself as otherwise I wouldn't ever get anything else done!

But I'm really passionate about the Scottish Highlands. I spend a lot of my time up there. I absolutely love being out and about in my wellies and my waterproofs, walking on the beaches and in the hills with my dog. There's mountains for a backdrop and there's lochs and rainbows and the sea and it's absolutely glorious. Looking out for buzzards and sparrowhawks and the occasional golden eagle, and red deer and seals and even the occasional wild cat. The wildlife is fantastic. That's my absolute favourite thing, being up there.

I also want to get into learning to fly, even though that's quite a stretch goal. Again, I went back to what I used to like doing in childhood and as a kid I had a very very early version of Flight Simulator. I had a friend at school who was majorly into flying – he wanted to be an airline pilot. And sometimes I'd go round to his house after school and we'd play on Flight Simulator together and I was just fascinated by it. And I love flying, and I love airports. So a little while ago I thought: why not? Why not learn to fly? Of course, it seemed like an impossible pipe-dream, and it may still be, but I love a challenge! I love things that are almost out of reach. It's



massively expensive and it takes a lot of time to learn how to fly, and there's a huge amount to learn. So it'll be a huge learning curve and I'm not even sure it's possible. But I'm going to give it a go. I haven't done much about it yet but it's a long-term plan. I want to try and get a pilots license before I'm 50 or at least 50-something. So I've got a few years to achieve it. It's a stretch-goal. But I like stretch-goals!

So interests-wise, I have a very full life! And that's been by design. By which I mean, that's the way I've framed it, deliberately. Because it would be very tempting to look at my life and talk about how empty it is. I don't have any family. I'm divorced. I don't have any children. So at one level, I have nobody and nothing in my life. There's a lot of people who, quite understandably, would think that their life is very empty in those circumstances.

But my life is very full. Mostly, I love my life. I'm so grateful for all the good things I have. And I'm determined to live it to the full. I've just had enough really of suffering! I think an entire childhood of trauma, and then 30 years of chronic illness, and mental health difficulties, and everything I've been through... well, I've had enough of all of that.

Of course it's not like I can just click my fingers and all that stuff goes away. But I'm not a victim of my circumstances.

I can choose how to spend my time, and most crucially I can choose how I view myself and my life. And since my divorce I've been absolutely focused and determined on building a life that I enjoy. I have nobody - okay, so it's up to me then. It's up to me to give myself the experiences I want to have. It's up to me to give myself the love I need. It's up to me to take care of everything. And I could sit down in a puddle and cry about how hard that is (and sometimes I do!) But mostly I speak positively to myself, and I encourage myself, and I get on my own side, and I say, 'Come on then, let's make the most of it.'

Being honest, it is tough being single sometimes - being single and especially not having kids, isn't easy. Our society isn't really set up for that. But it's also full of possibilities. I get to do whatever I want to do with my free time. I don't have to take anyone else into account. I'm not tied at all. That's why I spend so much time up in Scotland - because I want to. There's nobody else to consult on it. When I'm up there, I get to spend each day exactly as I want to. That's amazing! I really have such a good time.

I'm very blessed because I thoroughly enjoy my own company. I'm a profound introvert so I really don't need a lot of human interaction to keep me going. I've been weeks at a time without really seeing anyone, and it does get to me after a while, but anything less than



about a week and it doesn't bother me in the slightest. I have my dog – she's my best friend and the best companion in the world. And I just love being on my own and doing what I want to do. It's a very happy life that I have. I get to choose my own happiness.

And I know most people would find that level of solitude hard to cope with! I know a bit weird! And I've often thought about whether it's a trauma thing, but I really don't think it is. This is just the way I'm wired. I tick all the boxes for introversion. I get easily exhausted by interaction with people. I have a vivid imagination, I easily get lost in a book, I draw my energy from being on my own, I can sit for hours and watch the sea. I love that kind of solitude – it's a huge part of who I am and how I manage my mental health.

It's part too, I think, of who I am as a writer. I think it's hard to be a writer if you want to be with people all the time. You have to be comfortable being lost in your own head. And I think this is what so much of life is about – finding out who you are, who you *really* are, not just who you think you ought to be to fit in. And then being that person. Becoming the best version of yourself.

You have to figure out what kind of person you are and then *love* being that kind of person. You're never going to have great mental health if you hate who you are, if you're always striving to

be someone else. I used to look at people who enjoyed parties and went out for drinks with colleagues after work, and I used to feel inadequate. But that's not who I am. I'm quiet. I'm introverted. I like my own company. I don't drink tea – or coffee! That's who I am. And I'm okay with that.

Okay, I'll admit it, it's not very British to not like tea. But I just can't stand it. I absolutely hate it. And it sounds ridiculous, but I spent years hating myself for hating tea. It was like: why can't I just be normal and fit in?! I don't even like coffee. So yes, OK, I'm just plain weird.

And for years I drank coffee just to try to fit in. And then I suddenly realised how ridiculous that was, and I stopped. I gave up on trying to be normal, trying to fit in. I just decided really that I was going to be happy being me.

... which was kind of difficult, because it's a matter of survival to fit in, to be part of the group. But I realised that we can spend so much time in life trying to fit in, trying to be who we think we should be, rather than figuring out what we do actually like, and then doing that. So, I had to figure out what my interests were. I had to give myself permission to be interested in stuff. It didn't used to be socially acceptable or normal for women to be interested in football. I don't care. It's a bit weird for a woman in her forties to want to learn to fly.



I don't care. It's odd that I spend so much time on my own in the Highlands and thoroughly enjoy that solitude. Again, I don't care. I've found out what I'm into, what I like.

In effect, I think, I've learned to accept myself. And really this is so much of what recovery from abuse is about. Not just dealing with the trauma, the flashbacks, the shame. But actually learning to live in a world where we're not being abused, where it's safe to let your guard down. Where it's safe to hope for things. Where it's safe to enjoy things.

Recovery is about building a life worth living. It's about finding out who you are and celebrating that. Allowing yourself to be whoever and whatever you are, however weird that is. Shame tells us that we're unacceptable and then we spend so much energy trying to become acceptable. I had to learn to sidestep the shame and just get on and be me. I had to learn to tell shame where to go, rather than allowing it to control me and to boss my life. And I think that starts with accepting yourself, weirdness and all. I'm glad, of course, now that I did!

So recovery from trauma isn't just about dealing with the difficult stuff. It's also about building something positive in your life, and in many ways I think that can be the hardest thing to do. Because we've been conditioned to life being awful. That's what we're used to. It's hard to want anything nice, because

we've been programmed to fear that it'll be taken away, or that it's only really a prelude to something bad happening. Like I said, childhood trauma, such as abuse – it's really really terrible, because of what it does to our belief systems. It's not just a single or even a series of events, of things that happened. It's the legacy in our core beliefs, and this is one of the beliefs that spreads its tentacles throughout our life: the belief that we don't deserve good things, that it's not safe to enjoy good things. We have to actively work against that.

So abuse makes us feel unworthy of enjoyment, and so for me, finding out what I enjoy doing, and then actually doing it – that's been massive. I had to get over that belief that I didn't deserve good things, and I had to get over the belief that having good things was selfish. There was that kind of survivor guilt too – how can I enjoy good things, when other people are still suffering? But what I eventually realised was that I'm no use to anyone if I'm not in a good place myself. Self-care, looking after myself, living a full life – it's absolutely essential. You know, we have to fit our oxygen mask before we help others – it's that kind of idea.

But change didn't just happen. I used to bemoan the fact that there weren't good things in my life, as if that confirmed the belief that I didn't deserve them. And so the leap I had to make was to realise that good things will only happen in my life if



I plan them. They won't just turn up on my doorstep. And I think that's part of the shift into adult life from childhood. When we're children, on Christmas Day – if we have a good enough family – then we wake up and the presents are just there. It's as if by magic that they appear. That's the whole narrative around Santa, what that's all about. And I think we can take that belief into adulthood. That good stuff will just appear.

But you know if you're a parent how much time and effort and expense you put into Christmas to make it a magical time for your kids. You know full well that you've had to work hard and save up for presents, that you've had to buy them, you've had to wrap them. You have to go to a lot of effort. And in the meanwhile, often no-one is buying any presents for you!

So you have to buy your own presents. And after trauma, we have to set ourselves up for good things. We have to be deliberate about it. We're not going to come down on Christmas morning and find that Santa has just made our life great. We have to go out and put the effort in.

So we have to actually plan for good things. We can't get to the weekend, and sit around feeling miserable because we're not doing anything. We have to plan these things in advance. We have to plan them ahead of time. If we enjoy football, we've got to order

Sky Sports or we've got to book some tickets or whatever. And we have to earn the money to pay for it. There's a cost to it – it's not just there for us, under the Christmas tree. If we want to have positive new experiences, then we have to book a holiday if we want to travel. We've got to book flights and accommodation. It's actually a lot of work. It's a lot of effort. But if we don't put in that effort, then it won't happen.

Now let's be real: that takes a lot of planning and effort, and some people will think, oh but I couldn't cope with any of that. And that's fine. When I was having my breakdown, I could barely cope with getting out of bed. It was baby steps. It was little things. At that point it was getting a three month free trial of Spotify so that I had some new music to listen to – that was the extent of learning to enjoy myself. It was a subscription to a magazine so that once a month I had the pleasure of an envelope plopping through the letterbox, and something to enjoy. It was tiny things.

Nowadays, I get to enjoy fishing off the north coast of Scotland because I've done a hundred things to facilitate that. It's about relationships, and investing time into those, and long-term plans for where to stay when I'm in Scotland, and planning my diary through the year for times to get away from work. It's a lot of planning so that I can have a day of bliss on a boat. And what I've come to realise is that the planning and the anticipation



can be just as enjoyable as the actual experience.

And this was a real aha moment for me because, like a lot of survivors, I'd tended to only ever dread the future, not look forward to it. Even if I were doing something nice, I almost had this sense of wishing that it were over, so that I could relax again, knowing that nothing bad had happened. Everything was laced with dread.

And I think probably a key to tackling that was that I learned to be 'mindful'. By that I mean that I learned to notice that I was feeling dread, that I was expecting bad stuff to happen, and I very gently learned to reassure myself that it was going to be alright. I started this stream of self-talk in my head to soothe myself, to reassure myself.

So I'd notice the feeling of dread, and I'd comment on it to myself - 'oh look, there's that feeling of dread again. That's my brain trying to keep me safe by warning me that something might go wrong. That's what my brain does because of trauma. It's just a warning. But it's okay, because I'm safe now. Bad stuff isn't going to happen now.'

And so I'd just keep on reassuring myself like that. And if I noticed that I was in the amber zone - if that sense of dread was making me agitated and on edge, then I'd focus on breathing and calming my body down again. And by doing that

over and over and over again - many, many times - then I learned to better control and really to conquer that sense of dread, until it stopped being an issue.

So it was like an alarm that sounds in my brain and body, and I began to learn to switch it off, and not by ignoring it - which is what we do most of the time - but by acknowledging it. Mostly I used to sense this alarm - feel the dread, feel the anxiety - and then immediately I would beat myself up for it. 'Oh I'm stupid, I'm overreacting, I'm ruining everything by feeling like this.' But I came to realise that beating myself up like that didn't help - it just made things worse. Or I tried to ignore it, but that didn't work. It's like trying to relax while a smoke alarm is going off - you just can't do it.

Instead, I allowed myself to notice it, and then I reframed it. I said to myself, 'This is my brain trying to keep me safe. Well done, brain. Thank you, brain. But, you know what, brain? It's okay. It's a false alarm. Bad things always used to happen after good things when I was a child. But it's not like that anymore. So you can turn the alarm off. I've heard it, I'll be on the look-out for danger, but we don't need to evacuate. Brain, it's okay.'

So lots of self-talk, reassuring myself. How we talk to ourselves - the dialogue we carry on with ourselves throughout the day - is absolutely vital. Often we feel victims of it - you know, that it just



happens. But as soon as we realise that we can interrupt that dialogue, that we can argue back, that we can have a voice, then everything changes. We can choose how we speak to ourselves. We can interrupt our negative thoughts. We can speak softly and gently and encouragingly to ourselves. We don't have to put up with the self-abuse that is often our default. So, learning to enjoy myself was really about identifying the things that I really wanted to do, to accept who I really was, the interests that I had, and then allowing myself to

enjoy those things. And really learning to calm the dread down, calm the anxiety down while I was doing those things. And then doing that until really, I got to a place where I *am* able to enjoy things, I *am* able to look forward to things. I'm really *able* to enjoy life.

So I hope that helps at least a little. 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 [carolynspring.com/podcasts](https://www.carolynspring.com/podcasts).

