



# PODCAST #9 – SUNSHINE IN DECEMBER



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: 'Sunshine in December'

It's been a while since my last podcast ... for which I apologise. Life just became too busy last year and the logistics of doing a podcast became temporarily un-overcome-able ... but only temporarily. And so here I am. New year, new podcast ...

So it's a new year and last year – 2019 – was super-busy for me. In November alone I delivered seven training days, actually in just 27 days, so that was quite exhausting. But I knew that it would be, so I planned then for a lot of downtime in December. First of all I went away with a friend for some winter sun, which was marvellous, although a bit odd to be sat in the pool bar in the glorious sunshine listening to Christmas songs – especially 'The weather outside is frightful!' Errr ... no, it's really not! It really was quite delightful! And I've never seen anything more ridiculous than a model reindeer and fake snow in a sun, sand and sea holiday resort!

I then went to the other extreme and for Christmas and New Year I was up in the Highlands of Scotland, where I go regularly – my favourite place on earth. I was expecting minus temperatures and snow, but actually I was really blessed with



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the weather. The first week I was there it was blue skies every single day and really really mild – just magnificent, and far better than at home in Cambridgeshire where apparently it rained non-stop and we had some flooding.

So it's one of those things that reminds you that whatever your expectations are, however we predict the future to be, it might not be like that at all in reality. Reindeer juxtaposed with suncream really does flip your head a bit, and so does walking the Highlands at Christmas in shirt sleeves. It's one of those things that 'what is', the here-and-now, often contradicts the 'what we expect' based on prior experience. Trauma so often gets us locked into predictions about the future based on the past. And sometimes those predictions are accurate. But often they're not. They're just our brain's best guess about what will happen in the future, and it has a negative slant on it, a catastrophic element to it, in order to be 'better safe than sorry'.

And I think one of the things that has helped me more than anything is being able to recognise that my brain predicts the future. But it doesn't *know*. It guesses. And its guesses are skewed negatively. Bad stuff *might* happen in the future. Or it might not. And when I'm actually in that future, when the future has become present, then I need to be present to it. I need to see it as it actually is, rather than arguing that it can't be. Like me sat

by the pool with Christmas songs. It IS mid-December, even though everything is telling me that it can't be, because my brain's pattern for December has been cold and wet and miserable. And yet the here-and-now is saying warm and sunny and swimming pools.

So of course the thing that's happened there is that I changed my environment. If I'd stayed in the UK, I would indeed have experienced mid-December as cold and wet and miserable. My prediction, my expectation, would have been largely borne out. But I'd flown abroad with the deliberate intention of getting some restorative sun on skin. And yet, even while I was enjoying that – and boy was I enjoying that: it was marvellous! – my brain was still saying to me, 'I didn't predict this. I didn't expect this. It can't be right! It feels weird!'

Of course, by the end of the ten days that I was abroad, my brain had adapted to the weather conditions out there and I was struggling then to get it to recognise that when we got off the plane it would be cold and wet and miserable. How could that be? Just a few hours ago my friend and I were sat by the pool soaking up the rays.

And so this is what our brains are like. They make assumptions and predictions based on the past, and often struggle to come to terms with what a different reality might be like, in a different



environment. When we've grown up in an environment of trauma, of abuse, or emotional neglect, then our brains predict that life will always be cold and wet and miserable. Our brains struggle to imagine a poolside setting, of warm rays. And so we erroneously conclude that it doesn't exist. Or that it doesn't exist FOR US.

And yet what we need to do, metaphorically speaking, to recover from trauma, is to get on a plane. It's so often to change our environment. It's to shift our lives away from where people treat us badly, where we treat OURSELVES badly, where it's wet and cold and miserable, where it's struggle and sludge and suffering, to a life of warm rays.

And of course our instant reaction to that is so often, 'But I can't! This IS my life. I live in the UK in December. There's no other option. It's alright for you, but it's not for me ...'

And I get that, because that's exactly how I used to think by default. When I was really going through it with my breakdown, with dissociative episodes, with suicide and self-harm, with what just felt like incessant insanity, I couldn't imagine that life would ever - could ever! - be any different. Because that's exactly what trauma does to you. It gets you focused on imminent, here-and-now threat, and you don't have the luxury

of future thinking, or imagination, or hope. So it's a survival strategy to focus on imminent risk, for your brain to be constantly in danger mode, and your body to be in the amber zone or the red zone. It makes perfect sense.

But the way *forwards* - and there is always a way forwards, it's just a case of believing that it's there and eventually finding it - the way forwards is to live in the green zone, with our front brains switched on, rather than be dictated to by our survival-based back brains. Because our back brains are focused on surviving threat, responding to danger, reacting to trauma. They predict cold and wet and miserable weather. They get us reaching for coats and scarves and blankets.

But our front brains are capable of much more expansive thinking. Our front brains *can* say, 'Is it cold and wet and miserable EVERYWHERE in the world in December? Is there an alternative future? Is there at least the possibility of a different life, even if I don't know how to live it?'

Often if we dare to think that, what kicks in then is that sense of, 'Yes, but I don't know how to live that alternative life, I don't have the resources, I can't cope even with my day-to-day. I don't have the capacity for it. And anyway I don't deserve it. I don't deserve good things. I'm living the life I deserve right now.'



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So we're consumed by shame, and that belief in our inherent badness, and we daren't reach out for anything better, because we don't want to be disappointed. So we're protecting ourselves from future pain, the pain of shattered hopes, by not hoping at all. And we just try to manage our symptoms and cope hour by hour, and we daren't lift our eyes to the horizon and wonder what's beyond it. But oh what a shame that is, when we stay like that. Trauma really does rob us then of life and joy and expansiveness.

And the biggest shame is that for the majority of people – not everyone, but surely at least half – for the majority of people the abuse is *not* ongoing. The abuse *is* past. So our protective back brains, which are geared towards survival, are doing a tremendous job of trying to keep us safe. But the sad thing is that it's a job that has largely been made redundant, at least to the same degree. We don't need to be hypervigilant listening out for a footstep on the stair at night, and so being unable to sleep, because we don't live with our abusers any more and our front door is locked. There are no steps on the stairs. We don't need to defend against being humiliated by our Year 8 German teacher any more, because we're not in Year 8, we're not in school, we're not learning German. We don't need to be deprived of good things any more, because we have autonomy

over our lives – we're not children any more dependent on adults to allow us goodness. We can give that goodness to ourselves.

So our back brain predicts and expects based on the accumulation of our beliefs from our experiences, and especially our early life experiences. But it's not very good at noticing when things have changed. It's not very good at imagining that you can escape the wet, cold, miserable December weather in the UK by flying abroad.

Now, in reality, literally flying abroad is an issue of logistics and resources. There will probably be lots of people listening to me thinking, 'Well, that's alright for you, because you were able to afford to fly abroad in December. You had the money to, you had the time off work, you didn't have any family responsibilities.' And you're absolutely right. I'm very very blessed, and I'm really grateful for the freedoms that I have now, that I didn't used to have.

All I'd say is that ten, fifteen years ago I couldn't even have imagined the freedoms that I have now. I'd been working full-time for a good number of years after my breakdown before I could afford my first foreign holiday. And even being able to go on that first foreign holiday took a huge amount of effort – to deal with the anxiety, the 'what-ifs', to overcome the shame, the sense of



unworthiness, the guilt, the sense that I didn't deserve it, that I shouldn't be doing it, the absolute conviction that if I had a good thing then it would all go horrendously wrong, that I would be punished in some way.

What was so striking for me this year was that I worked really hard all year, I was absolutely exhausted by the end of November when I finished training, and then I went on a holiday that I had absolutely no guilt over. (I did make a donation to offset the carbon footprint of the flight, because that was my only remaining source of guilt!) But otherwise I was able to allow myself the goodness of it. I was able to enjoy it. I was able to stay in my sacred space of saying, 'This is me. This is who I am. This is what I need. I need to recharge. I need to rest. I need to enjoy the gratification of all the goodness for which I have deferred gratification while I've been working so hard. And it's good. It's good to be here. It's okay to be me.'

And that has been an absolutely massive journey for me. I mean – how hard is it for us, in Brene Brown's words, to stay in our sacred space and actually revel in the goodness of being alive, to be grateful and blessed and full of joy, rather than needing to beat ourselves up?

And just as that holiday was the reward for a year's worth of hard work, and the accumulation of credit, if you like, for

things I've put in place in my life, so that's what recovery from trauma is like. You make deposits in the bank of recovery every day, by doing simple things, and eventually that credit is converted into a life that is worth living. For me, those simple things were just getting up, getting out of bed. Just making the bed. Just getting washed. Just going for a walk. Just reading something – getting some input into me that was external to the thoughts inhabiting my head.

And I think this is so important, to recognise that when we don't have vision for ourselves, when don't have hope and belief and imagination for things to be different, then we need to get that hope from outside of ourselves. We are a system, and one of the rules of a system is that if it is closed, it will stay static. You need something external to come into a system to change things. So much of the time, when I just lived in utter misery and pain and distress and suffering, I used to think that the answer to it was to talk about how miserable I was and felt. And to be sure that's part of it – to express feelings, to know what it is that we're feeling, to allow those feelings to metabolise. But I think it also needs an enzyme, a catalyst, something from the outside too, in order to change it up. We need external input so that we can think differently, feel differently, imagine differently.

And for me that external input always came in the form of reading. Back then



there wasn't the plethora of input media that there is now - YouTube, podcasts, and forms other than reading. So for me at the time it was mainly books. But I was never not reading. I was always opening the valve and allowing something from the outside to penetrate my inside. Because I knew that if I didn't, my inside wouldn't change. How could it change, if nothing was ever added to the mix?

So I think one of the most helpful things you can do when you're stuck in the back brain survival-based danger mode, which gets you focused just on the here-and-now and closes down all hope of a different future because it's just trying to get through the present ... the most helpful thing is to open the valve of your mind and get new stuff pouring in. Borrow someone else's hope. Borrow someone else's vision. See what's possible.

When we spend all our time looking at our symptoms, and talking to others with the same symptoms and sharing notes on our symptoms, then it blocks us from imagining life without symptoms. Everything is a balance. It's good to focus on symptoms, to realise what trauma is doing to you. It's good to understand the neurobiology of it, to understand dissociation and fight/flight/freeze, and the green/amber/red of the trauma traffic light, and all of that. Of course it is. That is what we're in, it's what we're battling with, it's WHAT IS.

But we need to balance that with also looking at the WHAT ISN'T yet.

Because how are we going to bring into being the WHAT ISN'T if we can't see it, if we don't have vision for it, if we can't conceptualise it? We need a dream and a vision of 'what life can be like after trauma', not just to anchor ourselves in the 'what life is like WITH trauma'. It's both. So it's important to get input from people who live life after trauma or even without trauma, to get their vision and imagination and hope too. Very often we can end up surrounded by other people living in the wet and cold and miserable, and nobody around us is saying, 'You know, you don't have to live like this. There's another world out there. There's sunshine in other locales.'

And I think this is where language and words are so important. We can create realities for ourselves with what we say, with how we speak. This is a concept that is known about across many different disciplines or fields. It's known about from a religious/spiritual context, where in the Bible it says, 'The power of life and death are in the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit'. It's known about in the context of neurolinguistic programming and hypnotherapy, and the idea that we hypnotise ourselves with our words. It's known about in the context of CBT, and challenging catastrophic thoughts. It's known about within the attachment



research literature, for example Mary Main, and the way that HOW we talk about our childhoods is more indicative of our attachment style than WHAT we say about our childhoods.

So language is very important. And the first step for me really wasn't to kind of tell myself off for what I was saying – which was just adding another layer of guilt and blame and shame and 'oh here we go, something else I'm doing wrong'. But it was just to notice the kinds of things I said, without judgement, but with curiosity. 'Oh, look, how interesting – I'm using 'always' and 'never' again. I'm saying that I always get rejected, that I'll never be loved. That's interesting. That's putting life into two categories, into the binaries of always or never, rather than it being a spectrum. That's closing it down that I will either always be loved or never be loved. That life will be brilliant or life will be terrible. There's not much grey-scale in that, much spectrum, is it? How interesting.'

One of the big breakthroughs for me was when I began to learn to step back and notice what I was saying and thinking, rather than just focusing on trying to make everyone else in the world *listen* to what I was saying, or thinking. I used to spend so much of my time, it seemed, trying to get people to understand how terrible life was for me (and it really was, so it seemed like a reasonable thing to be doing). But over time that didn't really seem to

shift things. What instead really helped was when I began to notice what I was saying, and the inherent beliefs behind it.

That's what I found so helpful about therapy – because each week I would go in and pour out about how awful my week had been. And not only did we get to look at why my week was awful, but we also looked at how I talked about it; how I thought about it; all the 'always and nevers' that I was bringing to it. We began to notice how often my reflexive response to everything – to every possibility of a better future, like sitting in the sun in December – was 'I can't'. Over time I managed to shift away from arguing the point – and trying to just win the point, to get the therapist to believe me that I couldn't – to wondering why I was so insistent that I couldn't in the first place.

And that's what I find fascinating. Rather than getting stuck in the particulars of all the reasons why I 'can't' have a foreign holiday in December, and how unfair it is, and how it's alright for everyone else, why not focus instead on looking at the words we're using, the beliefs we're holding, the framework and the lens through which we're seeing life.

Because we can't problem-solve lack if we don't have the imagination to believe in a world of resources. If we shut ourselves down instantly, that it's



all impossible, that we just 'can't', then we won't spend the time trying to find solutions. Because if we can't, there's no point trying, is there? Instead what I found helpful was a tiny, subtle shift away from saying, 'I can't go on holiday in December' to 'I can't go on holiday in December yet.' The impossibility of the logistics of a winter sun holiday becomes something that is rooted in time and space – it's a temporary problem, not a *condition of my life*.

And I think that's what is so important to the way that we view the symptoms of trauma as well. I'm doing it in calling them that – calling them 'symptoms of trauma'. They are side-effects, consequences, responses, to things that other people have done (or not done) to us. They're natural and logical and expected. They're A plus B equals C. What they're not is a reflection of 'us as people, intrinsically'.

For example, powerlessness is a direct symptom or consequence of trauma. It's at many levels a neurobiological thing. Because at the time of the trauma, we go into survival mode. Our body and brain go automatically and unconsciously through a predictable sequence of responses to trauma, to try to survive. There's flight – get away, avoid, escape if possible. If it's not possible, we switch to fight – resist, fight back. Both of those are our amber responses, attempts at action. If they're not possible (and so often in trauma they're not, especially

when it's childhood trauma) then there's freeze. There's the submission of going still and playing dead, the red zone passive response of shutdown and dissociation and numbing and being somewhere else in your head until it's over.

It's entirely predictable and entirely understandable. It's a brilliant survival response that we've developed over millions of years of evolution. It's what we're supposed to do in that circumstance!

But unfortunately it has its neurobiological consequences – like ripples that keep rippling out throughout our life afterwards. Because in that freeze response of helplessness, we're stuck, still, immobile, shut down, powerless. And we call it 'being traumatised' when that response persists. When we don't ever get to get up, shake it off, remobilise again, be re-empowered.

And so into adulthood we believe that we can't. We believe we're powerless. We shut down whenever we have overwhelming emotions, whenever we feel we can't cope with the demands of life around us. We go right back into freeze.

And so this is a consequence, a neurobiological correlate of trauma. It makes sense. But it is a symptom. That's all. It's not who we are at root.





The biggest danger is when we start believing that it *is* who we are. 'I am powerless' is a very different place to be compared to, 'I am currently stuck in the freeze response, which is a consequence of trauma'. The first - 'I am powerless' - is about identity and it's very hard to change: this is who I am. The second - 'I am experiencing right now the powerlessness of trauma' - is a temporary state. So it's traits versus states. And recognising that we're in a temporary situation is so key for the way we then think about that powerlessness, and how we approach it.

Because if you believe you're inherently, intrinsically powerless, that that's just who you are as a human being, then you'll be powerless to tackle your powerlessness. Whereas if the powerlessness you're experiencing is temporary, like a cough as a symptom of bronchitis is temporary, then there's hope for a different future. You can start doing something to tackle it. You can find a cough mixture, you can get some antibiotics, you can give yourself bed-rest. Whereas if you've been born with a genetic coughing disorder, then yes, the only thing you can do is to learn to manage your symptoms.

So language is everything. The way we view things is everything. And that's

the biggest shift I'd encourage you, or your clients, to take this year: to begin to notice *HOW* we talk about things, not just *WHAT* we say. It's process over content.

Because there is a world out there - huge swathes of landmasses, whole continents - where it's not wet and cold and miserable in December. Where it's blue skies and sunshine. And so although we've grown up with trauma, with suffering and pain and distress, it's not the only reality in the world. And maybe we can't afford a plane out of here right now. But maybe in the future, if we work hard at recovery, we will be able to. That, to me, is exciting and motivating. That is a so much better way to live, even in amidst the anxiety and depression and despair, than to simply believe that this is my lot in life and all I can ever do is learn to manage it. No - there's more. We don't have to live like this.

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 [carolynspring.com/podcasts](https://www.carolynspring.com/podcasts).

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

