



Working with Trauma Webinar Series

Episode 2: Working with Trauma that has become stuck

by **Carolyn Spring**

WEBINAR 2: PART 1



- 'I think I can help you'
 - Feeling seen
 - Feeling heard
 - Feeling felt
- I soon felt 'stuck'
- Things actually had become worse
- It wasn't 'good to talk'

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- There were many reasons for my stuckness:
 - Contact with my family of origin who denied the reality of the abuse
 - Self-harm and suicidality as efforts to numb my distress
 - Powerlessness from a police investigation into the abuse I suffered
 - Escalating use of medication

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- Expecting my therapist to have the answers (but rejecting those answers)
- Signalling for help but not utilising that help
- I couldn't imagine a better future
- Dissociating from my own suffering
- Feeling too flawed and different – incapable of change

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- I didn't understand the stuckness as being a symptom of trauma
- Trauma, stuckness and powerlessness all share the same neurobiological fingerprint
- I didn't know anything about the trauma that I was trying to recover from
- I assumed that I was the way I was because it was the way I was – not because of trauma

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- I wanted my therapist to 'fix' me
- My therapist believed that I needed to overcome the powerlessness of trauma by being re-empowered – not by being rescued
- I had to build skills to deal with distress rather than relying on numbing and dissociation
- My stuckness was a symptom, not a failure

The red zone of freeze pulls on the handbrake in order to try to keep us safe. To recover from trauma we have to be willing to release that handbrake.

WEBINAR 2: PART 2



- To feel stuck after trauma is to be human
- Do we have unrealistic expectations about the recovery journey?
- We need what we as individuals need
- 'It takes as long as it takes': no shame in that
- In trauma therapy, slow is fast
- Forcing the pace often destabilises us and slows things down in the long run

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- I wanted quick relief!
- My pace was motivated by the amber zone
- By operating from the amber zone, I was reinforcing a trauma response
- We heal from trauma by returning to the green zone
- My drivenness belied a total lack of self-care and self-compassion

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- This dysregulation was a form of self-harm
- It kept me stuck in trauma for longer
- How we try to heal is often a reflection of how we have experienced care in childhood
- Recovery needs to be reparative in its manner: gentle and compassionate
- We don't recover from abuse by abusing ourselves

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- Do not confuse 'I feel stuck' with 'I want to become unstuck'
- In working with trauma we need to work with the experience of powerlessness and aloneness (unheard, unseen, unfelt)
- The trauma was a composite moment of unbearable stuckness
- 'I feel stuck' = the experience of trauma itself

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- 'I feel stuck' may be an invitation
- It can be reparative to meet the client in their communicated experience of trauma
- We need to be met in our pit of suffering
- This is perhaps an evolutionary need to signal danger to others
- Our stuckness **now** is very often a re-enactment of our stuckness **then**



WEBINAR 2: PART 3



- Working with trauma can be disorienting
- It often feels deskilling compared to work with other clients
- A common experience is of powerlessness (stuckness) to relieve the client's suffering
- The voices from within: 'Maybe you're not a good enough therapist?'

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- The client's unconscious, unarticulated, dissociated trauma is evoked, embodied, or enacted instead
- The therapist feels what the client cannot: having no agency or competence
- The stuckness in the work may be an enactment of the trauma itself

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- Dissociated trauma is evoked at your place of vulnerability: imposter syndrome
- The stuckness is blamed on the therapist's supposed lack of competence
- What is the client's narrative of stuckness really saying?
- What is the therapist's narrative of stuckness really saying?

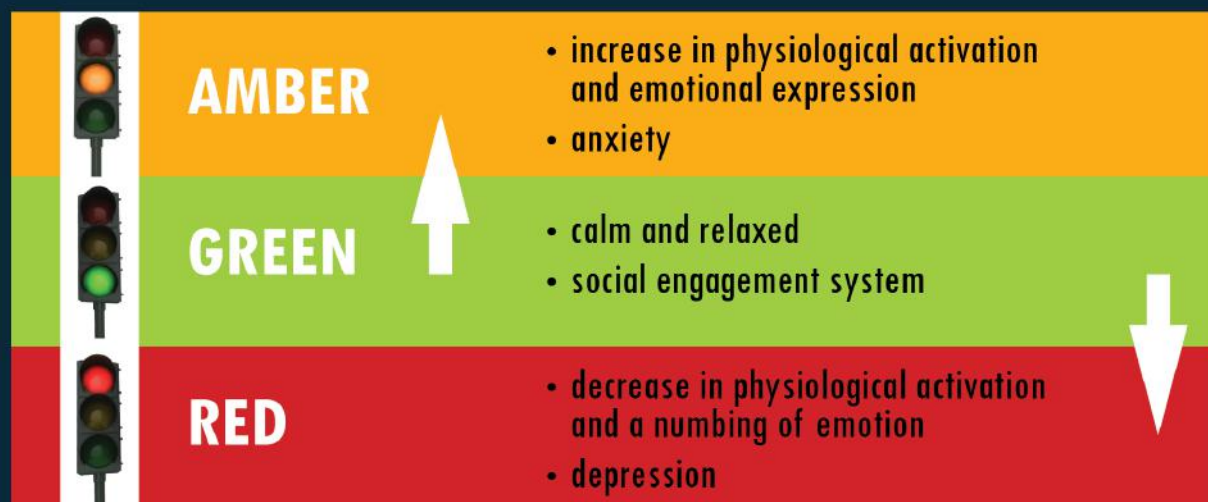
**Dissociated trauma says:
'Here I am. No-one will mention me because I am
unmentionable. But I'm here. This is what trauma
feels like. This is the stuckness, the hopelessness,
the powerlessness. Are you feeling it? Are you
feeling stuck and powerless yet?'**

DEFENSIVE RESPONSE CYCLE

The way we respond to threat is not random and we don't choose it at the time. Instead, our body and brain follow a predictable sequence of responses outside of conscious thought. We are traumatised when the threat is so overwhelming that we end up in stage 7 and we are not able to successfully move through stages 8 and 9.



RESPONSE TO CHALLENGE OR THREAT



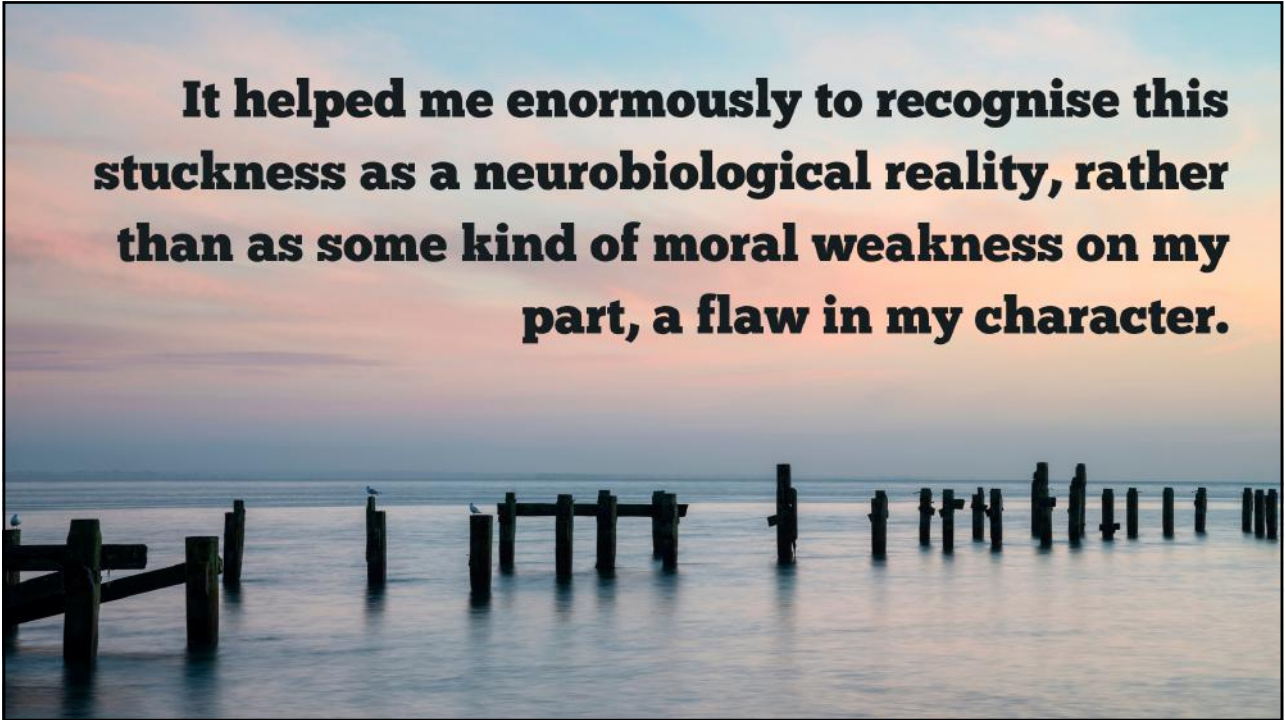
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- The red zone is mediated by the dorsal vagus nerve (an automatic response)
- Low-energy shutdown and freeze
- ‘Staying safe by staying still’ – a handbrake
- Mentally: dissociation, altered states of consciousness, depression, denial
- Back brain, not front brain
- To be traumatised is to be stuck in freeze

It helped me enormously to recognise this stuckness as a neurobiological reality, rather than as some kind of moral weakness on my part, a flaw in my character.



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- In freeze we release endogenous opioids
- Switching off pain signals to 'play dead'
- 'Depersonalisation' and 'derealisation'
- This is how I used to spend my life – in a dissociative state
- With the handbrake on, there is no motivation to move forwards or change

We lie still until the danger passes ... but with our alarm systems permanently set to 'on' after trauma, we don't recognise that the danger ever has passed.



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- My therapist drew my attention to this as my survival strategy
- 'Just notice, just be curious'
- I could live in the green zone if I was willing to face my pain rather than numbing it
- Red zone: lack of energy and motivation
- Body tries to stay safe by staying still (not moving, lethargy, CFS/ME)

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- I had to learn how to marshal my energies
- Spending time with energetic, not energy-sapping people
- Maximising energy through sleep, diet and exercise
- By moving daily, I was reassuring my body that it was safe now to move out of freeze

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- In the red zone, the front brain goes offline
- Back-brain: survival-based, short-term
- Essential for procedural learning, habits, acting without thinking, autopilot
- For autopilot to be helpful we need to be on the right course

- Front-brain: true 'homo sapiens' brain
 - Planning and strategising
 - Imagining a different future
 - Bringing an abstract vision into reality
 - Thinking, assessing, analysing
 - 'The thing beneath the thing'
 - What is really keeping us stuck?
- Therapy is a playground for the front brain

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**Trauma overdevelops our back brains
and underdevelops our front brains.**



- Learning to recognise when I was in a back brain space
- Learning to stay present
- In my back brain, I was reactive and touchy
- We need to be open and curious to move out of stuckness, not rigid and unteachable
- Instead of receiving challenge, I would spin off into a shame storm

Instead of hearing challenge as someone with my best interests at heart wanting to see me grow into my potential, I heard it as criticism, as rejection, as 'shaming'.



- The sweet spot of acceptance and challenge
- I needed to learn to invite challenge and input to think through my stuckness
- Our front brains are brilliant at problem-solving stuckness
- Feeling seen, heard and felt was the foundation for me to be able to stay present in my front brain

**Where is the sweet spot
between acceptance
and challenge?**



WEBINAR 2: PART 5



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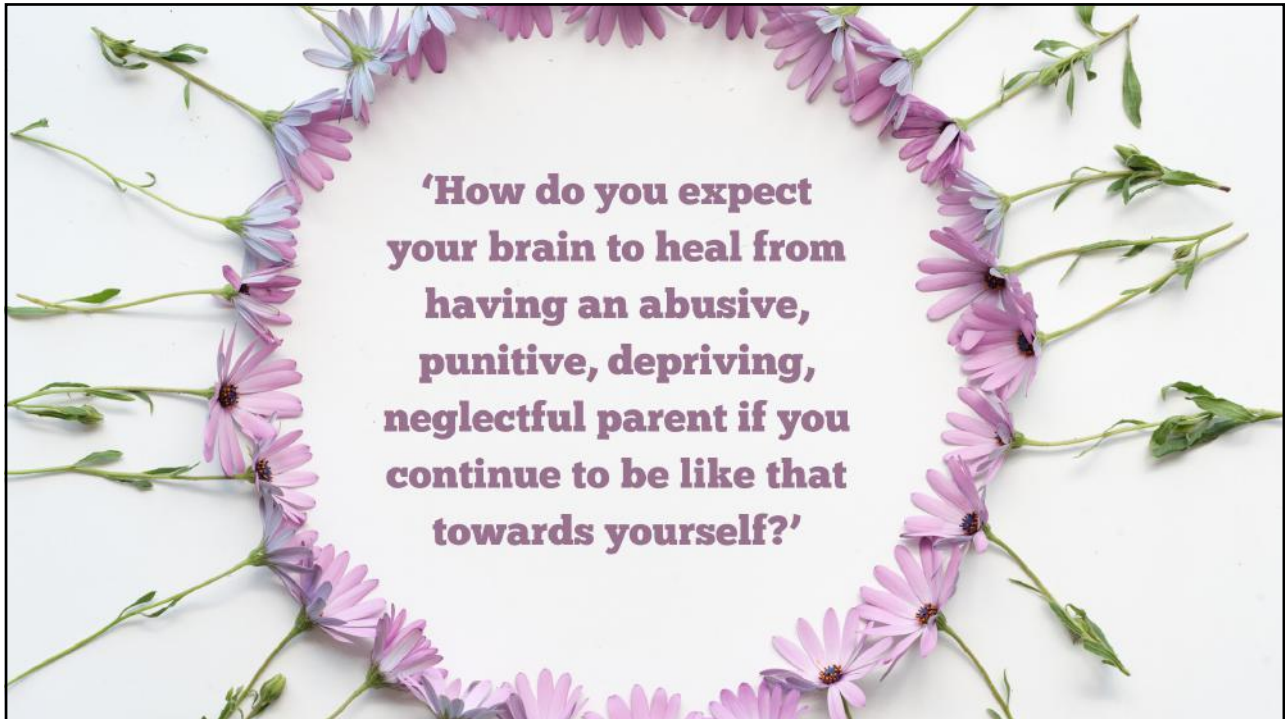
- What keeps the handbrake on?
 - Being triggered into the red zone
 - Habits and beliefs that keep us in the red zone: 'I will be safe if I am still'
- We become unstuck when we feel safe
- Continuing to abuse ourselves keeps us feeling unsafe and therefore stuck

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- Self-criticalness
- Self-hatred
- Frustration and impatience with ourselves
- Self-harm and suicidality
- Harsh self-talk
- Being punitive
- Self-sabotage and self-destruct



WEBINAR 2: PART 5



- It wasn't okay for the therapist not to treat me well
- And yet somehow it was okay for **me** not to treat me well!
- By perpetuating abuse towards myself, I kept myself triggered into the red zone (stuck)
- It is the same dynamic as with ongoing contact with abusers

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- This contact triggers memories and associations to warn us of danger
- We go into a numb state of dissociative denial
- Contact with abusers reinforces denial, shame and self-blame
- These 'embodied beliefs' are meant to keep us safe in the presence of our abusers



**Beliefs of worthlessness
and shame and
powerlessness are a
natural outworking, the
logical consequence, of
being in the red zone.
We shift these beliefs
when we shift out of the
red zone, not the other
way around.**

- Recovering from trauma is about learning to feel safe in our body again
- Stephen Porges: 'neuroception'
- We cannot move out of stuckness while we are feeling fundamentally unsafe



**•We cannot
move out of
stuckness
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are feeling
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