



## PODCAST #17 – HOW TO KEEP GOING THROUGH CHALLENGING TIMES (PART 1)



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](https://www.carolynspring.com).*

Welcome to this episode: 'How to keep going through challenging times (Part 1)'.

It is *such* a pleasure to be back behind the microphone, and I can only apologise for

my delay since the last podcast I recorded. Life is never predictable, but even less so after trauma. And the last few years have been particularly tricky for me to navigate, not just with the pandemic but also with what's been going on personally for me.

So this episode is going to be a bumper, double-length one to get back in the groove. And in it I'm going to give a bit of background about what has been happening for me, and I'm going to try and answer a question I was asked recently, which is 'How do you keep going through challenging times?' It's a really good question. And straight up, I need to say: I do not have a neat answer for this. I don't have a pat answer. What I do have are my messy and somewhat incomplete





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reflections on what's helped *me* to keep going through challenging times, and so I'll offer those thoughts in this episode in the hope that they will help someone else too.

But life is complex, adversity is complex and I never for one moment want to suggest otherwise. There are not 'three top tips' for reversing adversity that will work for everyone all the time, no matter how much we may wish there to be. We each live life uniquely, and although we can try to figure out some of the underlying principles — natural laws — that tip the odds more in our favour, I do think that most simplistic answers (the 'top-tip' solutions we find in many social media posts) ... I think they sometimes just end up victim-blaming. They increase our sense that our life isn't perfect because there's something fundamentally wrong with *us*, and, if there were not, we would not be finding life so hard.

But I do find life hard. It's never stopped being hard, and challenging, and painful. That's not all it is — it's not *just* hard: it's other things too, including at times deeply fulfilling and even joyful. And that's what I want to offer, really: a somewhat dogged and determined sense of *hope* that along with the pain and the hardness of it, there can arise good stuff too. Alongside. Both/and, not either/or.

And that has meant for me that, no matter what life throws at me, I keep going. I keep on keeping on. And I remain convinced that that's the best thing to do: that, however challenging life is, it's always better to keep on keeping on. For me it always feels better to have that as an attitude, as a direction (as a decision even) that we've taken in life: whatever happens, I will just keep on keeping on.

Because what I've seen in my life, having kept on keeping on for years and decades, is that, by doing so, actually many aspects of life have become easier. It's not a magic wand. It doesn't make everything better. But keeping on keeping on — despite that at times being exhausting — is the best way of getting things to improve in the long-term. Because I'm trusting in my ability, somehow, eventually, in some small way at least, to effect change, to make things different for myself. So that's what I want to talk about on this episode.

Anyway, first some background. I spoke on a previous podcast, episode 14, entitled 'Falling down: getting back up again' about what had happened to me starting just prior to the pandemic. In short, if you've not heard that podcasts or read the transcript, I was seriously and violently assaulted and multiply raped in a totally random, unprovoked, out of the blue stranger attack, in the kind of





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senseless, gratuitous episode of violence that really isn't supposed to happen. And it's certainly not supposed to happen to me — that was the belief I realised I held. In fact, there's a part of my brain that still can't quite believe that it did happen, but it really did.

That assault, and rape, which took place over several hours, and from which I was fortunate really to emerge alive (although there wasn't a whole lot of good fortune in the whole thing) ... that was then followed by a Lemony Snicket-like 'series of unfortunate events', including a quite serious fall at the end of 2020. So we were in lockdown, I was alone in a very remote location, and I fell down the stairs. In doing so, I seriously injured myself, and was unable to move or get help for many, many hours, at least one whole night, possibly longer. And it was really pretty grim and just an awful, traumatic event — hurting and alone is an awful combination. In retrospect, I don't think I actually took that fall seriously enough, partly because it was so traumatic and so I automatically denied and minimised it, but partly also because I just didn't want it to have happened. I didn't want it to affect me. I didn't want to make a fuss. I didn't want it to be 'yet another thing' that happened to me ... I guess because I feared that people — some people at least — would blame me for it in some way, assume I was doing it to

cause a scene, create a drama: that I was attention-seeking. Or that they wouldn't believe me. All the same reactions I'd had to my childhood trauma: it didn't happen; it doesn't matter; I'm fine; I don't want to draw attention to myself. So I went completely the other way and minimised and largely hid it.

And I wonder how many of us who have been previously traumatised can relate to that: the desperate, desperate need not to be the centre of attention? But obviously it reactivated traumatic reactions from things that had previously happened to me, both during the rape and throughout childhood: it reactivated powerlessness, helplessness, and what I've come to believe is in many respects the heart-cry of trauma, which is 'There's nobody there'. Increasingly I've come to see that the epicentre of trauma in our lives may be not just when something bad happens but more specifically when *there's nobody there* when something bad happens, either at the time or in the immediate aftermath.

'There's nobody there' then means that our nervous system cannot work through our in-built, evolutionary response to threat: we cannot complete the threat response cycle, so we stay stuck in it, which is what it means to be traumatised. We need to complete our threat response,





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and we can't, because we have evolved as a social species, as *homo sapiens*, to require, even as part of our innate attachment system, the support and co-regulation of other human beings to feel safe again. Hurt and alone screams to our nervous system, 'This really isn't safe!'

So trauma happens when 'there's nobody there' (at least nobody who can keep us safe), and trauma then persists when 'there's nobody there'. To heal, we need someone 'to be there' — somebody who is attentive and attuned enough to help re-regulate our nervous system; somebody who will then give our minds a chance to process and integrate the threat, so that our brain and body can return to a place of safety, to a baseline of what I call the green zone.

In childhood, when I was being abused, there was nobody there. When I was raped just before the pandemic, there was nobody there. When pandemic hit and we were all put into lockdown, there was nobody there. When I fell down the stairs, quite literally, stuck in awful pain with broken bones curled around the bannister, there was nobody there. Trauma, trauma, trauma. And the resolution of those traumatic incidents has necessarily involved there actually being someone there. That for me took the form of a quite wonderful therapist

who I've worked with — one of many — over recent years.

It's been a process of convincing my neurobiology that it's okay now because there is somebody there, at least at one level. We need to develop within us that sense of a secure base and a safe haven, of knowing that someone else is holding us in mind even if they're not with us in person. And that's what our neurobiology is constantly looking for — am I safe? Or am I alone on the savannah and vulnerable to predation by bears and lions and snakes and hyenas? It's fundamental to our mental health and fundamental to recovery from trauma that 'there's somebody there', and that's why it's so difficult for so many of us to heal and recover, because so much of the time, once again, like a repeating pattern in our life, 'there's nobody there'. And that's a lot of what I've been working out and working through the last few years.

Now, just to be clear: I'm not saying this because I have lots of people in my life. I'm saying it exactly because, having experienced life so painfully with the heart cry of 'There's nobody there' I know how painful it is to be on your own. I'm not married or with a partner, I don't have kids, I don't have family, I live on my own. So if I could solve trauma — if I could get my neurobiology to heal and re-regulate





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entirely on its own — believe me, I would. So many survivors, when I talk about the evolutionary necessity of other people in healing from trauma, complain, ‘But I don’t have anybody!’ and I completely get that, because that’s my experience too.

And that’s why trauma is so painful, and that’s why a relationship with a therapist can be so life-changing. And I know there are a million reasons why even that is out of reach for some people, and it’s a shocking indictment of our society that that’s the case. If I could change that, I would. All I’m saying is that this is the way that our bodies and brains have evolved to deal with trauma — with support from other people. I didn’t write the rules — I’m just learning to live by them. And I too wish recovery from trauma were not so lonely.

And so, anyway — a bit more context — one of the main consequences of that fall down the stairs for me was in fact the damage I did to my spine. My broken ribs eventually healed okay, although oh my word the pain from broken ribs is so awful. There was something in it for me of it being terrorising (full of terror) that it hurt so much to breathe, and yet obviously I absolutely needed to breathe. It was this sense of a fundamental conflict — breathe to live, but don’t want to breathe, because it hurts.

And that seemed to sum up for me, in sort of metaphorical terms, what it’s like just generally living with trauma: that paradox, that conflict at the heart of it. You need other people to heal, but it’s other people who have caused the hurt, either in their actions or in their neglect. You need to face the trauma, but facing the trauma is itself traumatic. You need to get out of freeze, and move, and act and take back control of your life again, but freeze is the only place that feels safe. So that was an interesting analogy and parallel process for me.

But it was the effect directly on my lumbar vertebrae that was the main physical consequence of the fall for me. Eventually though I got a series of diagnostics including an MRI and to cut a long story short I was eventually diagnosed with a long-term spinal condition that had never previously been identified despite years of pain and seeing various medical professionals. My back pain had always been dismissed, by me as well as by medical professionals, as ‘just’ being part of my extreme pain sensitivity, as a result of childhood trauma. So that at least was a bit of a silver lining to the whole incident, to get that identified, to have it recognised and made clearly visible on an MRI that there was something actually, definitively causing pain, and it wasn’t just my heightened pain response.







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That felt validating in many respects, although clearly not good news in and of itself. And certainly having a pre-existing spine problem and then falling down the stairs is not recommended! Indeed the fall seems to have massively exacerbated the deterioration in my spine and it's left me ongoingly in a pretty difficult place physically. And so over the last couple of years I've been having a series of procedures and then just last year I had a denervation operation, which basically cuts or rather burns away the nerve. It wasn't pleasant, to say the least! But it was at least partially successful and gave me a bit of respite from the pain and got me more mobile again, although its effects are temporary and things are getting worse again, which I was warned would happen. The whole problem is degenerative so that's not great news, so I have to do what I can to manage it with pain relief, with physio and strength and resistance exercises, and just by 'accepting my limitations', which has never been my strong point!

I've also had a lot of ill health the last few years, with various complications arising out of a bout of pneumonia. I've had a persistent, invasive pneumococcal infection, which flares up at the slightest provocation; I've had Covid four times so far; I've had a bout of pancreatitis; and unsurprisingly, given the number of

infections I've had, I've had various flare-ups of ME or chronic fatigue syndrome, which I've struggled with since I was 15. So it's just been one battle after another of either injury or illness, with an undercurrent of trauma rippling through it. Not a fun few years at all!

And so that's a long-winded way of explaining why I've not been as productive and prolific as I would like to have been in my work recently, especially in terms of new training and so on — and it gives context when I'm talking about keeping going through tough times. But, I'm here now, and although I feel some trepidation in doing so, I want to step forwards again into being productive, writing more, engaging more, training more, interacting more, and hopefully returning to some of the publishing and production levels that I used to enjoy. That's my hope and my aim at least! And it's a hope I hold in full awareness that life is fragile, that there are no guarantees and that every day is a gift.

But — and this is what I really want to talk about — despite everything that's happened, both in childhood (which as most of you will know involved chronic and pretty extreme trauma and sexual abuse) but also what's happened now more recently in adulthood — I'm really pretty upbeat and pretty cheerful. I'd





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say actually that I've never been happier than I am right now. So on the one hand there are ongoing challenges of pain and disability and illness and struggle, without much support — life really isn't easy — but on the other hand there's this sort of multiplication and proliferation of joy in me. I'm *struggling* more but also *enjoying* things more, if that doesn't sound like too much of a paradox.

And I think that sort of proves the point I've been making for several years now that joy is a skill that we learn; it's an orientation of our heart and soul; it's an attitudinal direction to our life in terms of what we focus on, and what we nurture and what we develop. We can experience joy in the midst of struggle and sorrow. And equally we can also lack joy in our lives even when things are going okay for us. Joy does not directly correlate, in other words, to the circumstances of our lives. And in many respects, we have to actively pursue joy, and actively pursue the things that will bring joy into our lives. Especially when we've had a lot of trauma, joy — enjoying things — can feel elusive.

And part of the reason for that is that we have to go out and grab it and invite it in. We have to build our lives around and towards joy experiences, in a very proactive way, and when we're struggling with trauma we often have our hands full

just coping and surviving — we don't have a lot of capacity to actively shape our future. So it's hard.

And so as I said earlier, one of the questions I've been asked a lot over the last few years is really how I manage to keep going in the face of so much ongoing adversity. And how I manage, I guess, not to be *bitter* about it.

So firstly, let's be real about this: I am not always cheerful, and I am not always not bitter. I certainly have my moments. And sometimes those moments catch me completely by surprise. Sometimes it's the most minor little things, a comment from someone, a circumstance, like not being able to lift or carry something or having to wait too long in line to queue and finding it physically impossible ... something relatively minor happens and there's an emotional wave that comes over me, like the affective equivalent of a menopausal hot flush (and I've also become very familiar with those in the physical sense too in recent years!)

It's just this sudden, in-rushing, painful, cry of the heart of, 'I can't do this!' It's that sense that right here, right now, it's all too much, and I don't have anything in the tank, and I can't cope with it, and it's not fair, and I hate life, and I hate everything, and 'why me' and just this





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whole flood of overwhelming emotion about the hardness and the difficulty and the painfulness and the suffering. And it catches me out, every single time, because it's triggered by a relative nothing. And when that flood of feeling comes, it comes. You can't just choose not to feel it. It comes. It has you.

So that's the reality. Life is hard, and sometimes you get hit by a wave of the pain of that. To be really clear, let me reiterate: I do not waft through life on a magic carpet of calm. Life is hard, and I feel the hardness. And sometimes it gets on top of me. I think that's normal. I think that happens to most people. And what I've had to learn to do is exactly that: to recognise that it's normal. That it happens to most people. That it's not just me. That it's part of the human condition, to be flooded by these feelings of overwhelm and impossibility, or anger and rage and outrage and the injustice of it all. Or to feel like all the energy and all the fight in you has suddenly been sucked out of you and there's nothing inside with which to fight any more. It's *normal*. There's nothing wrong with me for feeling like that. I'm not mad, I'm not bad, I'm not anything other than a human being reacting as human beings react.

The big difference in me to a few years ago is that I don't beat myself up for it. I don't

sink under a secondary wave of shame, that I'm having these feelings. I just have the primary feelings, and let them be, and I don't react to them by beating myself up for having them. Certainly, I grew up believing that feelings were bad, not least because I was repeatedly punished and shamed and even rejected for having them. But I don't believe it any more. They're just feelings. Nothing bad about them — they're neutral. They're just telling me, in that moment, that life is hard, and that I'm running low on capacity to deal with the hardness of it.

If I beat myself up for having those feelings, I'm then doubling the burden. I'm making a difficult situation twice as hard, because not only do I have the original feelings of overwhelm to deal with, but I also then have the feelings of shame and inadequacy and guilt and badness, that I've heaped upon myself, to deal with as well. And a number of years ago, when I grasped this concept for the first time, I made a deal with myself that I wasn't going to do that. Self-compassion says, 'Hey, you're having a hard enough time as it is dealing with these feelings of overwhelm. I'm not going to make it worse for you. I'm going to support you in it. What do you need?'

And it's that question, right in that moment of being flooded by overwhelm,







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that I ask myself: ‘What do I need?’ Such a strange and novel question, such a weird question, such a ‘why are you even asking this?’ question, based on my upbringing. So I’ve had to learn to ask it. And that’s not come naturally to me.

And what I’ve found is that, when I do ask it, instinctively now my hand moves to my chest and I just place it over my heart, and somehow — for me at least — that alone is really comforting. Because it speaks to me of having compassion for myself in that moment, rather than what I did for three or four decades, of beating myself up for finding life hard. No — life *is* hard.

And when those feelings, of just how hard it is, and maybe even how impossible it seems to be to continue to live it, then what I need more than anything is someone who says to me, ‘I get it. I’m sorry it’s so hard. I’m with you.’ And the only person who’s always with me, who can always respond perfectly, is me. Yes, like I said earlier, ideally we need someone else too, an external person, a real person, someone to counteract that sense, in that moment, that ‘There’s nobody there’. But if me is all I’ve got, then at least I’ll be there for myself in that moment. And that’s what I’ve learned, and of course am still learning, to do.

So that’s the first thing: how do I keep going through tough times? In the first

instance, by being supportive towards myself, rather than beating myself up for finding it tough. That alone has been a game-changer.

A lot of people will probably say at this point — a lot of people have said to me at this point — but how do I do that? How do I show that kindness towards myself, when I’m so full of self-hatred? It feels impossible. And I soooooo get that, because for many years for me it felt impossible to be anything other than full of contempt towards myself. It was almost like a compulsive, automated response inside me, to shower down hatred and a sneering, snarling sense of vitriol towards myself. I really did hate myself with every fibre of my being. So my ability nowadays to turn towards myself internally, to instinctively reach a hand out towards myself and place it kindly on my chest, and feel and think and say positive, warm, supportive words towards myself — that’s a new skill. I’ve had that skill a good few years now, but prior to that, I didn’t have it at all. I have learned it — which says to me that *it is learnable*.

And that’s what we’re going to look at in the second part of this podcast, where we’ll dive into what showing self-compassion actually looks like in practice, along with other aspects of how to keep going through tough times. For now though — thanks for listening.

