



## PODCAST #18 – HOW TO KEEP GOING THROUGH CHALLENGING TIMES (PART 2)



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 2)'.

So this episode is the second instalment of a two-parter and if you haven't listened

to the first part, which was episode 17, then please do so if you can, because it will give a lot more context and background.

Where we ended up at the end of the last episode, in looking at how to keep going through tough times, was how absolutely vital it was for me to be compassionate towards myself. And I was saying at the end that this was something that I really had to learn, because I hadn't grown up with it at all. I hadn't grown up with it being modelled to me; I hadn't grown up with receiving a whole lot of compassion. So I had to start from scratch.

And in the first place I learned it from experiencing from it others, especially from therapists I worked with, from





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people who, when I was in pain, showed me that same, hand-to-heart, empathic kindness. Sometimes it was really hard for me to show them that I was in pain, because decades of learning kicked in and I assumed that they would despise me or be cross with me for showing any distress, even any emotion at all. But when I did show them my pain, they consistently kept showing me that same compassionate response, and bit by bit, drip by drip, it went in. Because ultimately I didn't want to be an abuser. I didn't want to be abusive towards myself in the same way as I had experienced people being abusive towards me. I wanted to be kind to others, and I knew therefore that I had to be kind towards myself – otherwise it's a total mismatch: it doesn't add up.

So all those icky feelings, that resistance, that sense of panic and dread and overwhelm that I would feel – the skin-crawling self-consciousness when I was kind and compassionate towards myself – I had to just push through it. There's no other way. Bit by bit, moment by moment, making a choice every single time to swallow down the self-contempt and instead show even just a glimmer of kindness and compassion towards myself. Until it became more familiar and easier to do.

Because, you know, there's something very reassuring and safe about being abusive towards ourselves. It's so familiar. It feels so right. And so of course it feels unnatural to be kind and to speak with care and compassion towards yourself. But that unfamiliarity, that sense of awkwardness, even embarrassment – I think I eventually figured that there was no way to deal with it other than to deal with it: to push through. To do it anyway. Because, after all, they're just feelings. If I can make myself do housework when I really don't want to, if I can make myself ... I don't know, hang my clothes up when everything in me screams that I can't be bothered ... or pick up dog poo (again!) when I really don't feel like it ... or any of the million things that daily life consists of, of having to do things that we really don't want to have to do ... well those things prove to me that I can do uncomfortable things even though my feelings are screaming at me not to.

And that's what it was like with being kind to myself: pushing myself to do it, regardless of how icky it felt, regardless of how much I didn't want to do it. We get better at pushing through uncomfortable feelings the more we do it. This is why, incidentally, I think it's so important to train ourselves to make our bed on a





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morning, to take the trolley back to the trolley park, to put the cup straight in the dishwasher, and all the tiny little things of daily life, because they train us to put our feelings (usually our feelings of 'I can't be bothered') to one side and to do the right thing or the good thing or the best thing. It's connected. We're not going to be able to do the big things of pushing through deep, difficult feelings if we're not regularly pushing ourselves to do the little things. It grows our sense of discipline and tenacity and perseverance. The most dangerous path we can take is where we avoid doing difficult things at all, because then our emotional muscles will waste away. We have to be prepared to be uncomfortable in recovery from trauma, rather than justifying our avoidance of it by saying, 'But it makes me feel uncomfortable.' Of course it's uncomfortable. Anything new or challenging is uncomfortable at first. But that doesn't mean to say we shouldn't do it, or work to learn to do it.

So, back to my original point: how do I manage to keep going through tough times? I think a mistake we can make here, a cognitive distortion or error, is to assume that people who keep going, who show some level of grit or determination or resilience or whatever we want to call it, were just born that way. But I just don't think that's true. I think, yes – a happy, positive, loving, secure early life

environment more often teaches you the skills of grit and determination. But an easy childhood can equally teach you to be complacent and entitled and to expect that everything will come easy in adulthood.

I certainly know that I wasn't just born with a happy gene, with a positive and optimistic outlook. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Starting in adolescence and erupting throughout my twenties, I struggled massively with depression and overwhelm, with a huge negative bias, and a really, really pessimistic take on the world. And that's hardly surprising, given the abuse I'd suffered in childhood, and the chronic illness I battled on a daily basis. It makes perfect sense that if our lives are full of misery, then we'll be miserable about them. Of course! And that's very much what life was like for me every day. I struggled, and that struggle showed.

If I look back at myself in my twenties and even early thirties, I had very poor mental health not just because of the scale of trauma I'd experienced but also because I had such poor cognitive skills in how to frame my experiences, how to problem solve, how to assess truth, how to gain perspective, how to think about my thoughts, and how to reflect on my feelings. Life just happened to me, I just





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experienced what I experienced, and I had no skills at all for assessing my perception of my experience. Instead, I was prone to take everything personally, to believe that I was bad (because I felt bad) and that that badness was the sole cause of everything bad that ever happened to me. I felt stuck being me, and I felt entirely incapable of changing any of the circumstances in my life. I felt totally lacking in self-efficacy, or self-agency, in any sense of autonomy or control – not surprising, given my trauma and the lack of emotional training in my family environment. And so I used to get really, really frozen in simply feeling that life was bad, that I was bad, that other people were bad, that there was nothing I could do about anything, that life wasn't fair and that I was being uniquely persecuted by the universe. Of course! It makes sense. What was I supposed to think and feel?

And I think that's a very common place to be, and incidentally I believe it's in fact a trauma response, a way that our brain makes sense of unresolved threat, and not simply because we're bad or stupid. And even people who haven't themselves been traumatised, who aren't stuck themselves in that response – they show elements of it too. In fact someone just said to me the other day, 'Don't you ever wonder 'why you?'' Another response I often get is, 'How unlucky is that ... to be

abused in childhood and then for so much to also go wrong in adulthood!' Perfectly reasonably, everyday responses. But they expose within them as responses this very common belief that there's some kind of great cosmic meaning or purpose behind what happens to us, as if I have been singled out to be raped by anyone other than the guy who raped me. And they also reveal a kind of futile-but-hopeful belief that there's only a certain amount of 'allowable' suffering in the world, and that we can tolerate and accept a certain amount, but beyond that it becomes 'unfairly unfair'. It's what we see so often represented in some forms of religion – this idea that there's a vengeful God, or supernatural beings, or forces at work, or karma, that's just got us in the crosshairs and is making our life hell because we in some way deserve it.

And I'm being hyperbolic about it, but I've really had to work that one through myself, because I've personally found it to be one of the most unhelpful belief systems I can have if I'm going to keep going through difficult stuff – the idea, really, that I'm the subject of a cosmic conspiracy theory.

If I believe that I'm bad, and that what's happening to me is because I'm bad (and someone or something is assessing that), then that will totally sap me of any energy





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or any motivation whatsoever to do anything to make things better. Because, what's the point? If you're bad, and you deserve all the badness that's happening to you, then really you probably shouldn't try to fight it: that would be wrong. Surely it would be unjust for the suffering to stop if you deserve the suffering?!

If we really think this through, though, we'll realise that there's a major fallacy of logic at play here for us as trauma survivors. As trauma survivors, we want things to be better. And yet at the same time, we often say that we deserve our suffering, because it's as a result of our own badness. So that's a contradiction, a conflict in us — we want the suffering to end, and then on another level we continue the narrative that we're bad and we deserve bad things and the bad things have happened because we're bad.

But the 'I'm bad and deserve bad things' narrative is patently not true, and unbelievably unhelpful. I continued that same narrative for many years, and so I continually sabotaged every step forward I took, with two steps back, to ensure that I stayed in the same place of suffering that I intrinsically believed I deserved. We can't heal from trauma if we continue to believe that we deserved the trauma. I think it's one of the most important beliefs we have to tackle. And we have to

be serious about tackling it, because it's foundational to every other step forwards we'll take.

So I've been able to keep on keeping on through tough times because, firstly, I've been able to develop some measure of self-compassion towards myself, and secondly because I've been able to develop a belief system that I do not deserve bad things to happen to me (regardless of how many bad things do in fact happen to me), and that, thirdly, there is a way, somehow (even if I don't know exactly how) to do something to ameliorate my situation. I might not have the answers, but I have the ability to seek the answers and ask the questions. I trust in my ability to figure it out, no matter how long that takes.

And the biggest breakthrough for me on that was understanding that powerlessness is a core component of trauma: trauma literally renders us powerless in the red zone of the freeze response, the dorsal vagal circuit, as I talk about endlessly elsewhere. And so trauma and powerlessness go hand in hand at the moment of a bad thing happening, and they go hand in hand in our response to and adaptation to trauma afterwards. To be traumatised is to be rendered powerless and then to continue to feel powerless. We then feel too powerless





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to do anything about feeling powerless. It's the biggest Catch-22 in the history of Catch-22s. To heal from trauma, we need to feel empowered. But we feel powerless to do that: powerless to be empowered.

And understanding that core double-bind of trauma seems to have flicked on a light switch in my brain. It helped me recognise that every time I feel powerless and that 'I can't' and that 'it's hopeless' and that 'there's nothing that I can do about anything' – *that's* a trauma response. It's not the truth. It's just a trauma response. Those beliefs, those automatic reactions, that self-narrative, are the manifestation of trauma in my life.

During trauma, we're held as it were in the jaws of the bear and there is nothing at all that we can do about that except to play dead. So our neurobiology kicks in with its evolutionary survival response, and floods us with paralysing, endogenous opioids, as our last ditch attempt at surviving. That response is then what gets reactivated a thousand times a day, every time we're faced with threat and challenge. That sense of 'do nothing ... because I'm powerless' is what persists in our neurobiology, in the way that our brain and body are wired, after trauma. It's a trauma response. But it's not true. It *was* true, when we were in the jaws of the bear. But it's no longer true now, even

though my brain and body are stuck in it. Because – 'Look: no bear!' There used to be a bear, but there isn't any more. The trauma is over.

So that's what turned the light bulb on for me, my major and persisting 'aha' moment: that every time I feel powerless to change my situation, to do anything about anything, to do anything at all to make life better, to keep on keeping on, I simply acknowledge it for what it is. Hand on heart, and I say to myself, sometimes silently, sometimes literally out loud, 'Ah yeah, okay, that's my trauma response. That's just powerlessness.' And I pause, and notice it, and breathe in some self-compassion for myself (because that's a really hard place to be in, a really painful feeling to be feeling, so I need a bucket-load of self-compassion). And then I push on through it and say to myself, hand still on heart, 'But I'm not powerless *now*. There's no bear *now*. So what am I going to do? What's the plan?'

So when I get overwhelmed by this flood of feeling, this triggered sense of 'I can't do this any more!' and 'Why me?' and 'It's not fair', I take a moment, hand on heart, I breathe, I show compassion towards myself, and I recognise it for what it is: 'This is just a flood of feeling. It's just a trauma response.' And I just let it be. I don't fight it. I don't resist it. I don't argue





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with it. I don't do anything with it except just wait for it to pass. Because it will pass. If I engage with it, and debate with it, and listen to it, and believe it — and especially if I act on it — then for certain it will take longer to pass. If the feeling floods and I sit there and engage with it and start saying to myself, 'I can't do anything' and 'Life will never get better' and 'This is the way it is' and 'I'll never feel safe' and 'There will never be anybody there' and 'I'll probably just get raped again ...' then all of a sudden I'm in a vortex of deeper and deeper despair. I'm digging a hole and I'm going further and further underground. And that just triggers more despair.

But if I can just catch it, and recognise what's going on, and say, in a kind of unfazed, calm, shrug-shoulders kind of a way, 'Oh here we go ... there's that wave again ...' and if I can not react to the reaction, and especially if I can just put my hand on my heart and breathe and speak compassionately towards myself ... if I can say things like, 'It's okay ... it's going to be okay ... It's just a feeling ... It'll pass in a moment ... I'm here ... We got this ... It's just a wave ... ride the wave ... feel the feeling but don't believe the feeling ...' — if I can get those things down as mantras that I say to myself when the wave hits, then I'm more likely to be able to let the wave pass through me and pass over me. But most importantly, I let the wave come

and I let the wave go. I don't add to it by despairing at my despair, by panicking at my panic, by beating myself up for feeling beaten up.

It's not easy. It's sooo not easy. It takes endless practice. Fortunately — in a way, fortunately! — I've had plenty of opportunity to practice, because I got caught up in a storm that brought wave after wave after wave. The storm wasn't my fault, and I could do nothing to stop it coming. I just had to keep on keeping on through it. I knew that I was either going to drown, or I had to learn to ride the waves.

When people say to me, 'But how do you start being kind to yourself? I can't do it!' then I totally get that — it's like I have an immediate flashback to my own unremitting self-hatred over those many decades, and it makes me kind of shiver with horror and fear at just how awful those times were, and how hard self-hatred and self-criticism is to live with: living 24/7 with someone who's beating you up. And then it's like I feel so grateful for how different things are for me now, that my instinct more often than not nowadays is to be kind to myself when that wave comes, rather than hating on myself. And that's why I believe so firmly that we have to be willing to learn to be kind to ourselves. Because although it's





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really hard to do, especially at first, it's nowhere near as hard as continuing to live life where you're beating yourself up all the time, where you're continually triggering your own threat response system because, when the waves of painful emotion come, you're piling on a tsunami of self-hatred too.

I think I spent many years in wishful thinking, in childish magical thinking, of waiting for rescue – the rescue that never came when I was a child, that I was still hoping would come for me as an adult. I think we can very easily get locked into that when we're in therapy, of wishing and hoping and manoeuvring to try to get the therapist or someone else to rescue us. But I eventually realised that the harsh reality of harsh reality is that we have to take action ourselves. The child in us wants to be rescued – of course. Of course, of course, of course! Children *should* be rescued. It makes perfect sense that, when it didn't happen for us in childhood, we're still looking for that rescue now in adulthood. But the role and the responsibility of an adult is to be the one who does the rescuing.

I had to be willing to grow up into my adult self, to go in and rescue my child self. And I'm not talking about anything complicated here. I'm just talking about being willing, when that wave of

distressing emotion hits, to take a breath, to put your hand on your heart, and to speak kindly and gently to yourself, to reassure yourself, to rescue your child self in that moment, by being the adult who takes charge and who speaks reassuringly and calmly and confidently. I had to learn to be that adult to myself. And as part of that I had to really grieve and give up on the idea that life would just be okay if someone came and rescued me instead. Now hear me right: I'm not saying that we shouldn't have been rescued. I'm just saying that when 'There's nobody there', *we're still there.*

When I was stuck at the bottom of the stairs in too much pain to be able to even crawl to the phone for help, one of the things I did well was not beating myself up for having fallen. I didn't let myself go down the path of catastrophising. I didn't let myself go down the path of thinking 'Why me?' I tripped and I fell. That's all that happened. It wasn't because I was bad. It wasn't because a vengeful supernatural being or force was out to get me. It wasn't because I was stupid. It wasn't because something good had recently happened, and now we had to have something bad happen to even it up. It was just an accident.

When I was raped, yes that was because an evil, vengeful, inhuman human being







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did something really bad to me. But that doesn't mean that the rest of the universe is like that, or that I'm like that, or that I deserved it. It was just a bad thing that happened. In both circumstances – the fall and the rape – I had to rescue myself. I had to figure out what to do. When a wave of emotion – when a triggered memory – of either of those events, or any other traumatic event, hits me now, the same thing is true. Feelings of overwhelm and powerlessness and distress and 'It's too much' and 'I can't' ... and I return to my mantra, my semi-ritualised response: hand on heart, and breathe, and recognise and acknowledge and name the feelings, and re-regulate the feelings, and say, eventually, 'Okay, so what's the plan?'

That response doesn't make any of the difficult things less difficult. It doesn't eradicate them. It doesn't mean they didn't happen. It doesn't mean that I won't be triggered again in 5 minutes' time. It doesn't stop the wave coming. But it does mean that I'm still standing after the wave has passed, and I can get on and

make a plan to swim to shore. And that's what I keep doing. I just keep on keeping on. Because the alternative – well, the alternative is to drown. And I don't want to drown. And I don't want others to drown either.

So I hope that's been helpful. As I said right at the beginning, there's no quick-fix, no magic solution in any of this, but that in itself is part of the answer: that we don't expect there to be. If we can just grasp that there's no magic waving of a wand, no magical rescue, no magical top ten tips, then it can help us, I think, to be more realistic about the necessity of us being kind to ourselves, the necessity of us being the adult and soothing the child in us, and the necessity of us being our own rescuer in all the bad things that have happened and which, because we live in an imperfect world, may to some extent at least continue to happen.

Thank you for listening. And keep going – just as you are.

