



## PODCAST #19 — HOW DO WE LEARN TO TRUST PEOPLE AFTER TRAUMA?



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 do we learn to trust people after trauma?'

And that's a question that I've heard a lot of people ask, and that I've grappled with repeatedly in my life. Because mistrust

seems to come just so naturally, and is so hard to shift. For me, it's expressed itself as a constant sense of hypervigilance and wariness, an ill-defined dread on the inside of me. It has never really been a conscious thought or belief — I've never woken up on a morning aiming to mistrust people. I've just been able to see a pattern, over time, of me always hanging back, not leaning into relationships, skirting around people — because ultimately there's this fierce certainty on the inside that you *will* get hurt, that it *will* go wrong, that this person *will* reject you or betray you or abandon you.

And that persistent, unshakeable belief, and the raw, awful pain when you are hurt or betrayed or rejected — that to me was the first hint that it's a trauma reaction, because it always feels like a matter of life or death. And that pervasive,





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indiscriminate mistrust isn't as a result of a careful weighing up of the facts about someone, and whether or not they are trustworthy. It's more an invisible, unknowable, dissociated sense of threat. Traumatic mistrust can feel both elusive and overwhelming, and therefore very difficult to overcome.

So how do we learn to trust trustworthy people then? Well, I don't think it's a simple matter of just 'six steps' or 'three top tips' and we can learn to do it. It's nuanced and complex, and perhaps that's why it can feel so frustrating when other people say things like, 'You just need to trust your partner' or 'You just need to trust your therapist' — 'These are safe people'. What I hear them saying beneath their words is, 'What is wrong with you that you're so mistrustful?!'

Being forced to trust immediately increases my mistrust. One therapist I briefly worked with (very briefly), said to me in the first session or two, 'You're just going to have to trust me.' Not only did that make me want to run a mile (and indeed I did), but it also exploded a landmine of shame in me. What I heard that therapist saying, in effect, was, 'You are wrong and fundamentally flawed as a person for struggling to trust me. It's a choice you're making to mistrust. And now you need to override everything you're feeling and why you're feeling it, and just *choose* to trust me (even though I'm a complete stranger).' I don't suppose for one minute that that was what that

person was intending to communicate or erupt in me. But it was a lifelong message I'd always had — that *my* mistrust was a problem in *me*, and that I needed simply to choose not to be like this any more.

It took me a long time to eventually realise that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with *me* — only something very wrong with the experiences I've had in life. Those experiences — of trauma, at the hands of very untrustworthy people — naturally led my brain and body to be mistrustful of other humans. Of course! It was my best attempt, by my brain and body, to keep me safe: to reduce the risk of being hurt and harmed by other human beings in the future.

So this vortex of mistrust on the inside of me was there for a reason. It was a natural instinct in the service of survival, and thank goodness we have it. And I think that's the first step — to recognise that there's nothing wrong with us. Our mistrust is a consequence of what we've experienced. It's not our fault. Our radar has become biased towards threat and danger, but only because it's trying to keep us safe. Yes, obviously, we now need our radar to become more accurate, and to distinguish between safe and unsafe, trustworthy and untrustworthy, on a granular, case-by-case basis. But our default mistrust is simply telling us that we've encountered a lot of untrustworthy people, not that we are fundamentally flawed.





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So we don't need to 'fix' this mistrust. We don't need to excise it out of ourselves: cut it out like it's a cancer. Maybe in the first instance we just need to acknowledge what it's saying about our lives — that we've been through some tough times. That doesn't deserve judgment, and beating ourselves up. That deserves compassion.

But many of us have indeed spent our whole lives beating ourselves up for our failures to be 'normal' — for our inability to trust and form relationships easily with others. And so having some empathy towards ourselves for that, rather than being critical, can feel like a big step, and quite a counter-intuitive one. But I do think it's a necessary starting-point. We need to accept ourselves as we are (mistrust and all). And then we need to have compassion on ourselves for *why* we are the way we are, which is largely because of what other people have done to us. So it's not our fault. The starting point of recovery from so much trauma — at least trauma inflicted by other people — is to be able to say, 'It's not my fault.'

When we're feeling mistrustful, our tendency may be to think, 'Oh for goodness' sake, what's wrong with me that I'm like this?!' But instead, it's so much more helpful to say to ourselves, 'Oh, okay, what's *happened* to me that I'm like this?' And then to show ourselves the compassion and understanding that we so desperately crave, to give ourselves a break rather than being critical. Learning

to give ourselves a break can be one of the greatest steps we take in healing from trauma.

We instinctively know that what we need is compassion and understanding, rather than criticism or coercion. And so that's what I'd want from a therapist too. I'd want a compassionate response along the lines of: 'I'm so sorry that these awful things have happened to you!' rather than, 'Right, so how do we get you to trust me then?' And of course, ironically, the therapist who responds to me with compassion is going to win my trust an awful lot quicker than the therapist who demands that I just crack on and trust them.

Because if the compassion and the understanding isn't there, with a therapist as with anyone, it's okay for us to walk away. For years, though, for me, the mere thought of walking away from relationships — any relationship, even an abusive one, even one that made me feel terrible about myself — just felt too terrifying, and I couldn't do it. I think this is understandable too though. I think it maybe has its roots in our evolutionary history, and the terror we evolved to feel if we were left alone on the prehistoric savanna. Being alone meant we were vulnerable to predation by any passing lion or bear. And when we've suffered a lot of traumatic aloneness — when attachment figures haven't been there for us — we can be so sensitised to being left alone, that we're unable to see beyond





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the panic of the possibility of it to really assess if a relationship is good for us.

So rather than asking, 'Is this person trustworthy? Are they safe? Are they good for me?' we get stuck at the level of asking, 'Will they reject me? And if so, will I be on my own?' And we fail therefore sometimes to risk-assess at all. That was certainly true of me. I was always more focused on what other people thought of me, rather than what I thought of them. The question wasn't so much, 'Are they safe?' but 'Will they reject me?' My default, my norm for relationships, was to be abused, and being abused felt safer than being alone. Indeed, the less I liked someone or the less safe I felt with them, the more effort I would sometimes make, to get them to be okay with me. I would try to win them over — in effect, so that they wouldn't turn on me.

My strategy was 'please and appease'. But really, in a lot of cases, when I encountered someone I didn't feel safe with or who made me feel terrible about being me, what I should have done was to turn and walk away and give them a wide berth. Our actions evolutionarily are driven by a simple axis of 'approach' or 'avoid': we're programmed to approach what's safe and avoid what's dangerous. But that got skewed at an early age in me, as it does in many complex trauma survivors. And so I would approach people who were dangerous, and avoid people who were safe.

It took a long time for me to learn that it was okay for me to 'avoid' certain people, especially the ones who made me feel 'less than', or defective, or reduced in some way, and that I wasn't a bad person for not wanting to hang out with absolutely everyone. I had been a very passive 'recipient' of other people — I would find myself with other people having insinuated themselves into my airspace, presumably because they wanted something from me. And I just assumed, without even thinking about it, that I had to just put up with them and also that I had to give them whatever they wanted. It never used to occur to me that I had a choice in the matter.

It was a real 'aha' moment for me when I realised for the first time that actually I'm an adult now, I'm in charge of my life, and that I get to choose (to a large degree at least) with whom I spend my time. I realised — gradually — that it's within both my power and my remit to figure out who is safe for me to spend time with. And that I don't have to just hang out with people who have attached themselves to me, but that I *can* say no, that I *can* move away (rather than being stuck in freeze when I feel unsafe), and that I *can* and should conduct a 'risk assessment' on anyone who comes near me.

That changes it from a passive, traumatic mistrust approach of avoiding all people because by default I assume they're all untrustworthy, towards an active approach where I trust *myself* to be able





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to assess if someone is trustworthy, and then I proactively keep myself safe as the relationship progresses.

For a long time, not knowing any better, I defaulted to the passive, shame-based approach. I didn't use to do anything at all to keep myself safe when untrustworthy people entered my airspace. I just felt uncomfortable — sometimes deeply so — but went into freeze, and then tried to stuff down the feelings of discomfort whilst also giving them whatever they wanted, just to keep them on side. I didn't take the warning signals as prompts for me to *act* by doing something. And that allowed an awful lot of dangerous people to take advantage of me.

Like many complex trauma survivors, I learned through necessity in childhood to shut off my inner radar and just to do what was expected of me, especially by people I perceived to be in authority, or people I perceived to be 'bigger and stronger' than me. So I didn't tune in to that quiet hum in my guts about what *I* want in a relationship, and whether *I* want to approach or avoid. It didn't occur to me that I had a choice.

Instead, *I* used to feel bad at having a bad feeling about someone. I assumed that it was something wrong with *me* — not with them. So I would override the warning signals from my gut, and I'd berate myself for being paranoid or suspicious or 'having difficulty with trust'. I'd heard it said so many times that abuse survivors

find it difficult to trust, that I assumed the problem was just my messed-up-ness, rather than that my gut was right when it was saying to me, 'This person isn't safe!' I invalidated myself time and time again.

So, very often I would suppress the warning signals, and just forge ahead without taking on board any of the wisdom of my gut. Instead of saying, 'Hmm, let's be careful here', I would often go the other way, and throw caution to the wind, and have no boundaries in the relationship at all. I would then be both surprised and devastated when, months or years down the line, I found myself drowning in a very uneven relationship where the other person's needs or demands dominated to the exclusion of my own. And I'd eventually be like, 'Damn! I knew I shouldn't have trusted them! The warning signals were there, but I ignored them. Why didn't I listen to myself?!' And I'd beat myself up for it again.

And so, unconsciously, it became a lot easier to have a blanket rule of 'Don't trust people — don't trust *anyone*'. The alternative was to do the really hard work of sifting through the evidence that this person was presenting to me, to see if they were trustworthy or not: to tune into my gut, to tune into my intuition, to keep reflecting on it, to keep thinking about it, and to act on the evidence. It's a lot easier, a lot less hard work, simply to back off and say, 'I don't do people' or 'I don't trust therapists' or 'I don't trust men (or women)' than it is to take each person as







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an individual, and to really subject them to scrutiny, and to negotiate the kind of relationship with them that we want. In my life, I've had recurrent patterns of either backing off completely, or of forging ahead with no limits or boundaries — either 'Don't trust at all', or 'Just trust blindly'. And both have got me into relational messes.

So it's like in the example of showing up for a first session with a therapist, we'll often struggle with an overall, nebulous sense of 'I feel uncomfortable ... I don't want to open up ... I don't trust therapists ... I don't trust people ... I don't want to be here.' But it takes a lot more dedication to say, 'Okay, I'm not going to jump to any conclusions. I'm not going to prejudice my decision-making process. I'm going to go into this with my eyes open. I'm going to be alert, and curious, and I'm going to see what I see. And then I'm going to think about what I see, and I'm going to take the time to sit with those thoughts and figure out what I feel about it. And bit by bit, I'll see if I *can* trust them.'

Some of my most frustrating relational disasters have also been where it's like my radar has been totally inverted: it's flashed 'danger' to safe people, and 'safe' to dangerous people. Totally upside-down! And actually that makes sense, when you've been abused by the people who are supposed to care for you. Most abuse is perpetrated by people you know. And the overall context for safety that we've evolved for, and that we're even

generically taught, is that of 'stranger danger': our neurobiology is wired to feel that people who are familiar are safe, and that people who aren't familiar (people outside our band or tribe) are probably not safe. That's an evolutionary survival strategy that served us well for millions of years, but it's a bit anachronistic now. And it's completely useless when we're abused by people we know, and when it's actually strangers who are going to be the ones to help us — and every new therapist is a stranger to start with.

That generalisation approach is a prime example of the very basic risk assessment style of our primitive back brain. It generalises; it jumps to conclusions; it makes assumptions. It does so in order to make decisions quickly, to save time, so that we don't have to live life where we assess absolutely everyone from scratch every time we see them again. And mostly it works fine. But if we're struggling to trust safe people, and we're too prone to trusting unsafe people, then it could perhaps do with a bit of a tweak.

And this is where the front brain comes in, which is our supremely human, intelligent, discerning, thinking, wise brain. The back brain is survival-based, instinctive, and quite basic in its assessments. So when it comes to trust after trauma, we absolutely have to get the front brain online and not just operate out of our instincts and back brain shortcuts. If we're making decisions quickly, if we're jumping into relationships, if we're going with what we





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feel like without taking the time to really think it through and weigh it up and sleep on it, it's likely that it's our back brain that's in charge.

Getting the front brain online isn't difficult — but it does require more commitment and patience. One of the key ways I try to make sure my front brain is doing a risk assessment or thinking something through is by journaling. The slow act of writing down the words, thinking about what I'm thinking about, committing it to screen or paper, and then going back the next day or the next week and interrogating my decision-making process — that has been really helpful for me. It's also what we can do in therapy, to really slow things down and look at them from different angles and assess what's going on. But if we're being impulsive and racing to a decision, that's a red flag alert that our back brain has hold of the steering wheel.

I think for me personally another reason I didn't do any kind of risk assessment of people was because I didn't have any sense that I *could* do anything about anything anyway. That's the powerlessness of trauma, of learned helplessness. I think that comes out of a belief that there had been nothing I could have done as a child about the abuse I suffered, so there's probably nothing I can do now as an adult either. It becomes a default pattern, of 'What's the point in trying to protect myself?'

And I think that's one of the challenges of trauma recovery, in that we react (quite

understandably) out of our childhood experiences, but we need to learn to employ our *adult* self into the mix, because by and large (not completely, but mostly) we *can* now choose whom we spend time with, whom we are exposed to. We had zero choice in the matter as children, but as adults we do have the responsibility to assess risk in relationships and to *do something* to keep ourselves safe from dangerous people. So we can *actively* make assessments and choices, which is very different from the passivity of freeze and helplessness.

Assessing and choosing, though, feels very strange if you've been a people-pleaser all your life. And of course, people-pleasing is just another survival strategy, an attempt to be safe by smiling sweetly at everyone and doing what's expected of you and not causing a fuss, so that they won't hurt you or reject you. It's not a bad strategy *per se* — it just comes with the downside that people will take advantage of you, and that you spend your life running around after other people.

You have to weigh that up really — 'Is that what I want?' If it's not, you have to do something about it, and try a different relational strategy, such as collaboration and cooperation, where you're an equal. And if you don't have any experience of that, it can take a bit of learning: it has taken me decades to see myself as an equal in relationships, because trauma, and specifically abuse, always positions you as one-down.





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The opposite of people-pleasing, though (I realised) isn't people-*displeasing* — being obnoxious. Actually, I think it's being assertive. You can't be a people-pleaser and assertive at the same time. They're like on different ends of the see-saw.

When we're people-pleasing, as our best attempt to stay safe, then we have to keep on people's good side. And so we go along with whatever they want. We don't challenge them when they're out of line, or they're taking advantage, or they're being inequitable, or they're being offensive — because our survival strategy is just to be accepted by them *no matter what*. We can't be both assertive and give others *whatever* they want — it doesn't work.

Being assertive is about figuring out where your edges are, and what you'll tolerate, and then clearly but fairly and kindly defining those edges, and doing something (an active approach) when someone transgresses those edges — which might only be as minor as a look or saying something questioningly, but it's not allowing those edges to be erased.

As people-pleasers, though, we don't tend to want to point out those edges, and so people encroach more and more on our freedoms and wellbeing. And we can't object, because our strategy is always to smile sweetly (so that we don't get hurt), even though we may fume and be resentful under the surface.

So what I gradually had to learn to do was to step back from myself and take a position of being my own advocate. If it's my job to get a fair deal for myself and protect myself from harm, what would I say and do right now? I started asking those questions on my own behalf: 'Is this person safe? Do they have my best interests at heart? Are they interested in a mutually beneficial, equal, collaborative relationship, or are they out to use me and abuse me? Am I speaking up for myself, and for what I need? No? Come on then — let's do it ...'

What I realised was that my inability to trust people was bound up with my inability to set boundaries with people. I used to write people off by saying, 'Oh, give them an inch and they'll take a mile', and so I wouldn't even offer them the inch. Or alternatively I would just capitulate and give them the whole mile. So instead I had to learn to offer an inch and then say, 'No, no further' and see how they responded.

When I felt powerless, and incapable of being assertive, I assumed that people would ignore me. What I found instead, though, was that *most* people — *most trustworthy* people — responded positively. They took the inch you were offering, and that's all. And when people didn't stop at the single inch, that was the red flag and I would back away and 'avoid'. So I had to learn to define how much was okay, and then hold that limit in place. I







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had to be both *active* in assessing risk and *assertive* in responding to it.

That's hard work — it's much easier just to blindly trust or blindly mistrust — but I think it's fundamentally the only way that we learn to trust. The problem isn't with us — it's what's happened to us, and how that's shaped us into being very wary of people in the dangerous world we've inhabited. But we have the responsibility *now* to build the skills to assess risk in relationships, and to do the hard work of setting edges and analysing the evidence of what happens when people approach those edges.

So trust for me is not something that people just deserve or earn. A lot of it comes down to our struggle to trust ourselves — to be able to step up and speak out and hold boundaries (firmly, if necessary).

Of course, no-one is perfect. We cannot base 'trust' on the idea that the other person has to be perfect in their actions, their thoughts, their intentions, all the time — or we won't ever trust anyone. We

have to base it on seeing what happens when they do stray over the line, when we make it clear that that's not okay with us, and when we then give them the opportunity to step back into line. And if they don't, that's when the label 'untrustworthy' can be fairly applied to them, and when it's good to 'avoid'. Trusting — learning to trust — is a dynamic process that involves getting feedback and data and analysing it. It's not binary. It's not one size fits all. It's fluid. And if we can be assertive enough to set our own edges, then we'll get a lot of data very fast about how trustworthy people are in respecting those edges.

None of this is easy. I wish I had it all buttoned down! It's something I've been growing in, and will continue to grow in, I expect and hope, for a long time yet. But given that relationships are such a key aspect of life on this earth, it's perhaps worth a bit of effort to get better at them.

So I hope that's been helpful, at least a little, at least for some of you — and thanks for listening.

