

# Judith Herman's three stages of recovery from severe trauma

## Stage 1

The first stage of dealing with and overcoming trauma-related problems is about:

- Getting a 'road map' of the healing process.
- Establishing safety and stability in one's body, one's relationships, and the rest of one's life.
- Tapping into and developing one's own inner strengths, and any other potentially available resources for healing.
- Learning how to regulate one's emotions and avoid emotional overwhelm
- Developing and strengthening skills for managing painful and unwanted experiences, and minimizing unhelpful responses to them.

Most important, the key to healing from traumatic experiences in childhood is achieving these 'stage-one' goals of personal safety, genuine self-care, and healthy emotion-regulation capacities.

Importantly, the first stage of recovery and therapy is not about discussing or 'processing' memories of unwanted or abusive experiences, let alone 'recovering' them.

Of course, everything is not always so perfectly ordered and sequential. For example, during the first stage it may be necessary to discuss the contents of disturbing memories that are disrupting one's life. This may be required to help manage the memories, or to understand why it is hard to care for oneself (e.g., the abuser acted like or even said you were unworthy of care or love). However, in this case addressing memories is not the focus of therapy, but a means to achieving safety, stability, and greater ability to take care of oneself. Throughout all stages of recovery, it is often necessary to address psychological themes and 'dynamics' related to one's history of unwanted or abusive experiences. These include:

- Powerlessness
- Shame and guilt
- Distrust
- Re-enacting abusive patterns in current relationships

In the first stage these themes and dynamics must be addressed when they are obstacles to safety, self-care, and regulating one's emotions and behavior. Therapy can help with recognizing habitual behavior patterns, beliefs, and motivations that maintain self-defeating and self-destructive behaviors outside of conscious awareness or reflection. Increased awareness of these themes and dynamics brings greater understanding, greater ability to take responsibility for them, and greater capacity to respond differently to life

events. Mindfulness meditation practices can also help cultivate such awareness and freedom.

## Stage 2

This stage of recovery is often referred to as ‘remembrance and mourning.’

The main work of stage two involves:

- Reviewing and/or discussing memories to lessen their emotional intensity, to revise their meanings for one’s life and identity, to reduce flashbacks and nightmares if they are ongoing problems.
- Working through grief about unwanted or abusive experiences and their negative effects on one’s life.
- Mourning or working through grief about good experiences that one did not have, but that all children deserve.

After establishing a solid foundation of understanding, safety, stability and self-regulation skills one can decide – mindful of the potential pain and risks involved – whether or not to engage in the work of stage two. In fact, once the first stage of recovery has provided such a foundation, some people realize that thinking and talking about painful memories is not necessary to achieve their goals, at least in the short term. Some find that the memories are no longer disrupting their life and no longer of much interest to them. And sometimes people need to teach their therapists about this!

For those who choose to focus on disturbing memories, because those memories are still disrupting their lives, several ‘memory processing’ methods can be used during this stage. In general, these methods involve re-experiencing the memories within a safe and healing therapy setting. They can be effective at ending the influence of such memories in one’s daily life. EMDR practitioners and therapists experienced in working with trauma can provide this. This process does not need to take years – a few sessions can often be helpful, once people have attained stability and safety in their lives.

## Stage 3

The third stage of recovery focuses on *reconnecting* with people, meaningful activities, and other aspects of life. The person having learned about impacts of abuse during stage 1 and 2 that previously made it difficult for people to do this makes this easier.

Judith Herman’s book *Trauma and Recovery* describes all three stages of recovery in depth. Therapists and survivors of trauma have found it immensely helpful for over twenty years and it remains the most influential book in this area