

Living with our emotions when we have suffered major trauma in childhood

“Trauma survivors have symptoms instead of memories” (Harvey, 1990)

In terms how they are viewed by many people working in mental health services, trauma survivors might also be said to ‘have symptoms not emotions.’ Clinicians cannot ‘treat’ emotions nor get rid of them (without using powerful drugs or other techniques that can be damaging in many ways). Similarly, no matter how difficult we find our emotional reactions to things, we cannot rid ourselves of them (although we can use powerful techniques, such as cutting, that mask them or change our physical experience, but which are also damaging in many ways). Whilst being unable to rid ourselves of our emotions, we can get better at accepting them, ‘riding their wave’ and expressing them in ways that do not damage ourselves or others. We can find ways of not being quite so overwhelmed by their intensity.

We can find richer and less damaging ways of naming our experiences. For example, labelling fear ‘anxiety’ pushes us towards seeking expert help and treatments, perhaps ignoring the resources we and people who know us can draw on in order to cope with fear. Rather than seek experts or search the internet for treatments for personality disorder, bipolar disorder or whatever, we’d perhaps be better off finding out (i) why certain emotions trouble us greatly and (ii) learn and practice some new ways of living with troubling emotions that others employ but we perhaps missed out on learning.

Powerful emotions can push us out of our window of tolerance, making it hard to think and problem solve, and leading us to use drastic measures to try and feel more settled. We perhaps need to do some ordinary, calming things to help us ‘ride the wave’ until we gradually come back into the window of tolerance and can then focus on the issues that caused that spike in emotion, express our feelings in non-damaging ways, etc.