

Remember These 2 Helpful Concepts When Confronting Your Unhealed Trauma

Life is difficult. Bad things happen. Your mind, body, and soul cannot be completely closed to hurtful things that happen around you and to you.

Sometimes those wounds are deep. Your very best mental, physical and spiritual coping mechanisms aren't enough to get things back to normal. Your world is changed forever.

Some of the best research on trauma has looked at people who experienced exceptionally severe life disruptions: former prisoners of war, adults who experienced long-term abuse as children, loved ones of someone who died or survivors of terrorist attacks.

Those are circumstances when any human being's coping mechanisms could be overwhelmed. Such stories help us understand some of what your brain does when faced with difficult circumstances and provide elements that may help you find a good life again on the other side.

Here are two concepts I believe are especially helpful as you look at how difficult circumstances may be affecting your fear, anxiety and related symptoms.

First, you will be affected both internally and externally by your difficult circumstances. The external (or visible) effects may be easier to appreciate at first. Your physical health and/or your finances may be impacted. Your former way of living may be impossible to go back to. Other people may have forced you into circumstances that you cannot change.

But the internal effects are frequently as or more impactful

than the external ones. Your sense of safety and stability in the world may be shattered, or it was never able to develop at all. Your identity as a person might be altered. Your faith in your own ability to think, make decisions and have your decisions make a difference may be broken. Your ability to trust God or other people may be shaken.

The internal effects of those difficult circumstances will likely last longer and be more difficult to deal with than the direct circumstances themselves. Trying to ignore those internal effects does not make them go away. The only way to lessen their hold on you is to face them and bring them into the light. If you do not do this fully, they will eat away at your insides. Your body will likely take the brunt of the impact, and your physical symptoms will continue and perhaps worsen until you deal with what happened or is happening.

That's why many (not all!) people with a chronic illness also suffer from unhealed trauma from child abuse or unresolved bitterness over past wrongs.

Second, you have a choice about how you respond to even the most difficult and damaging circumstances. This may be difficult to appreciate when you're in the middle of tough stuff. You likely feel you have no control, which only adds to your anxiety and distress. And yet you always have more choices than you realize.

Who would have less control over their circumstances than prisoners of war? But remember Vice Admiral Stockdale? Not all POWs develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and some who do are able to overcome their symptoms and go on living well. One research study showed that POWs who chose to mentally focus on something good—such as thinking about the eventual end of the war or family they knew were praying for their return—experienced the best mental health outcomes and positive growth after their harrowing experience.

Choosing how you respond does not mean ignoring or refusing to acknowledge the unfairness, pain, destructiveness or perhaps very real evil of your reality. Instead it means being completely honest about the things that are outside your control but choosing to spend most of your energy focused on the things that are within your control. And there are always things that are within your control.

As the POWs' stories illustrate, even if you can't control anything in your environment, you can always choose what to think about. Most of the time you have other choices as well.

One of the best expressions of this I know is the Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

May you find the wisdom to know what you can change and the courage to take the actions that you can. {eo}

Dr. Carol Peters-Tanksley has practiced medicine for more than 25 years and is board-certified in obstetrics-gynecology and reproductive endocrinology. She received her medical degree from Loma Linda University, where she completed an OB-GYN residency. She also obtained a doctor of ministry degree from Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She makes her home in Austin, Texas, where she enjoys being Grandma Carol to four wonderful grandchildren. Connect with Dr. Carol at [. This passage is an excerpt from her book Overcoming Fear and Anxiety With Spiritual Warfare.](#)