

3 Exercises: Moving Out of Trauma

These three exercises, used in sequence, will help you separate yourself from the flood of thoughts and feelings that often follow the traumatic experience of relationship betrayal.



Exercise 1: Objectifying Your Thoughts

Set aside time when you can focus on this exercise without distraction. Stop after each step before you move to the next.

1. Choose a *positive* childhood event (grade school age or younger) that you experienced.
2. Close your eyes and try to re-experience the event in your mind. Use all 5 of your imaginary senses to make this memory as real as possible. (What do you see all around you? What are all the sounds you hear? What do you feel as you touch things with your hands, your feet, your skin? Do you smell? Taste?)
3. Spend at least a few minutes focused on that past experience. Instead of seeing it as a still image, let the memory move, like a movie scene that you're a part of. (Don't continue until you've spent some time with this memory.)
4. Now that you tuned into that experience, think instead about the last meal you ate. What was it? What did it taste like? Where were you when you ate it? What was going on around you? Once you have the scene in your mind, move on to the next step.
5. Consider what you can learn from this simple exercise: You are not your thoughts. If you really spent time doing the first part of this exercise, you likely tuned into an event that evoked an emotional response. In that moment, you were connected to the experience, *but it was a thought that was separate from you*. You could easily switch your attention to a different thought.

The Point: Thoughts and feelings triggered by the past can be observed and experienced, sometimes in powerful ways. In fact, the more powerful the event, the easier it is to feel connected to it. But the thoughts are not you. They are separate from you and so you are able to observe them. Or not observe them.

Now you're ready for the next exercise...

Exercise 2: Changing the Channel

“You can’t stop a bird from flying over your head, but you can keep it from making a nest in your hair.”

You cannot control all the thoughts that come to you. There are triggers all around you, reminders of the betrayal. But although you have little power over what comes into your mind (flying over your head), you *can* exercise control over whether or not they remain (making a nest in your hair).

Think of an intrusive thought that constantly bothers you. Maybe it’s an image of something that happened in the affair. Maybe it’s a repeating message of fear. Whatever it is, imagine it playing on a TV screen in front of you.

Now change the channel.

It’s hard to do, isn’t it. Even if you try to change the channel, the image probably switched back to where it was before. That’s why it’s important to not just turn *away* from one channel, but *turn to* an alternative. “Turn your channel” intentionally by focussing on these two questions:

1. *What am I grateful for?*

Think of something you are thankful for. As bleak as life may feel, you can still find some reason to acknowledge gratitude.

2. *What is the next step toward change I can take?*

The path to recovery is traveled one step at a time. Sometimes the steps are small, but they are still important. What is one thing you can do that moves you in a positive direction?

You could answer these questions in thought only, but I encourage you to write them down somewhere (a journal, your smartphone, etc.). Even better: share your answers with someone else.

The Point: We cannot focus our thoughts one two things at the same time. Instead of just trying to *stop thinking* something, replace the thought with something else... something positive. Change the channel. You’ll have to do this over and over again, but the point is to make the effort. In time, it will get easier.

Now you’re ready for the next exercise...

Exercise 3: Turning Cages Into Clouds

From this point forward, every time you experience obsessive thoughts or intrusive feelings coming over you, I want you to imagine them as a big cage that is being dropped over you, leaving you trapped inside. That is the threat of these experiences: the belief that they have control over you and you are a powerless victim.

Now imagine yourself walking up the bars that surround you and putting your hands around them. As you grip the bars, they turn into vapor. They become a cloud that surrounds you.

You see the cloud as a real cloud. Your thoughts are real thoughts.
You are in the middle of the mist, just like you feel lost in your anxiety or pain.
But you are not trapped; you can walk through the cloud.

You don't face these experiences by denying them or avoiding them. You acknowledge their presence, but instead of being caught in them, you determine to pass through them. You continue toward your healing.

If it helps, say it out loud every time you need to: "You are a cloud, not a cage. I will pass through this moment and move on."

The Point: On the other side of trauma, you can feel like a powerless victim. That's the cage. But the cage is an illusion; it's not the truth. Begin to change them into clouds/ They will show up over and over again, but you can walk through every one of them as you refuse to stay stuck, as you move toward your healing.