

Understanding:

With growing compassion we see the impact of those traumas.

Doing this step dramatically improves our perspective on ourselves, our lives, and what it means to be human. This is where we see the wonderful truth – these behaviors and attitudes we've been burdened with are NOT our identity. They are normal responses to trauma that *can be healed*. As we come to understand the impact of trauma on us, our lives make more sense. Before understanding how much of our behaviors were reactions to trauma, we had false and terrible ideas about ourselves. These ideas came from the lies of others and the understandable confusion people naturally experience after trauma. So much of the internal conflict in our minds was due to these inaccurate myths we carried about ourselves. Sometimes the compassionate understanding comes in sudden flashes of insight. Other times it's a slow dawning of gentle comprehension.

Psychological "trauma" is defined by the American Psychiatric Association as "an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others." (DSM IV, p. 424) Examples include military combat, violent personal attack, natural or manmade disasters, and torture. For children, sexually traumatic events may include age inappropriate sexual experiences without violence or injury. Traumas we are healing may also result from emotional and/or ritual abuse. Those of us who have experienced environments that were neglectful, unsafe, or harsh also often carry lasting wounds.

Compassion for ourselves helps to improve the quality of life (the way it feels to be us). While compassion for ourselves may be a foreign concept at the beginning, it will become a more and more familiar territory over time. Compassion is a strength and a skill – the more we develop it the easier it gets. There is a “vital cycle” between the Accepting and Understanding Steps. The Acceptance Step actually begins the process of compassionate understanding, and deeper understanding continues the process of acceptance. Compassion helps us to treat ourselves gently. Gentleness is vital to full healing. As the “Self-Care” Healing Principle indicates – we heal more quickly and thoroughly when we address only as much as we can safely handle while keeping a balanced life.

It is important to have support during this process. We will experience incredible release and relief during this step, and we also may unearth a lot of pain to grieve. (See the Learning, Harmonizing and Processing Steps for help with grieving). Some of the myths we are shedding played a defensive role, protecting us from the pain associated with the traumas and their impacts. As we unburden many of the painful and debilitating myths, we allow wounded aspects of ourselves to emerge for healing. We may notice a natural, physiological tendency to avoid the pain. While this may feel overwhelming at times, the rewards for facing these truths far outweigh the temporary pain.

Intense trauma that is not immediately processed compassionately always has lasting impacts. The impacts of trauma are many and varied. As we understand how our unprocessed trauma has impacted us we gain compassion for ourselves, begin healthier

behavior patterns, and are able to heal. We're going to share here some of the impact that emotional trauma has on human brains. In later steps we will talk about how to heal and transform these impacts.

Brain scans reveal that trauma actually changes the structure and function of the brain. It particularly affects the way we handle powerful emotional input and extremely stressful situations. Following are a few of the ways these changes can show themselves in our lives.

- Chronic fear, pain and the feeling of being unsafe can lead us to avoid situations, people, or even relationships in general.
- Self-negating myths kept stuck by traumatic memory can make it difficult for us to relate with others. E.g., if we carry a sense of unworthiness we may accept mistreatment.
- Powerful stored emotions intensify our reactions to some situations that our brains associate with a past trauma. This can lead to us being seen as “over sensitive”, “highly emotional,” etc. (This is similar to someone patting a friend who has an unseen sunburn on the back and being surprised at the intensity of the response.)
- Those of us who have experienced trauma cope by using a variety of psychological mechanisms. One of the most effective ways people cope with overwhelming trauma is called "dissociation." Dissociation can run the gamut from having trouble paying attention to extended mental blackouts. In the most extreme situations aspects of someone's psyche can actually seem to be mentally separate from the person. Dissociation interferes with our identity, memory, thoughts, feelings and experiences.
- Adults who were sexually abused in childhood are at higher risk for developing a variety of psychiatric disorders, including dissociative disorders (such as dissociative identity disorder/multiple personality disorder), anxiety disorders (panic attacks, etc.), personality disorders (borderline personality disorder, etc.), mood disorders (such as depression), PTSD, and addictions.

Here are many common impacts of trauma:

- **Internal changes:** self-esteem drops, feelings of shame, self-hatred, hypervigilance, disconnected from one's emotions.
- **Self-medicating behaviors:** addictions, numbing out, eating disorders, and excessive exercise, work and shopping.
- **Other common side effects:** chronic illness, difficulty focusing, low-functioning (grades, etc.), difficulty relating with others.
- **Sense of the world:** feeling isolated, “the only one that feels this way,” shamefully unique, the need to perform (perfectionism) and hide, the world feels dangerous, feeling of impending doom (thinking death is imminent), feeling like an imposter, feeling like an outsider in every group, subhuman, feeling the need to earn the right to live, to be loved, etc.

Here are some examples of understanding the impact of trauma. Notice the myths people often tell themselves about certain coping behaviors. Coping mechanisms that got us here are driven by desires for safety, love and living. The examples below are both generalized and simplified for clear reading. In reality coping mechanisms are more complex patterns of feelings, thoughts and behavior. Understanding a piece at a time helps us to unravel the complex patterns.

Coping Behaviors	Examples of some Myths that could apply	Examples of some Truths that could apply
Extreme security measures when there's no actual threat. Hypervigilance.	<i>"I'm a coward", "I'm paranoid", "I'm in constant danger", etc.</i>	Our protective "fight, flight or freeze" mode is stuck in overdrive in reaction to traumatic memories. Our bodies are trying to protect us.
Excessive sexual activity.	<i>"I'm a slut", "I'm bad", etc.</i>	We're trying desperately to feel good, or to stimulate suppressed aspects of ourselves. Searching for love. Seeking reassurance.
Intentional self-injury.	<i>"I'm defective", "I don't deserve to live", "I'm sick", etc.</i>	We're trying to feel something. Trying to distract from pain. Trying to overcome the pain. Anger towards perpetrators is turned inwards on self as a safer way to express it (but then it gets stuck that way).
Overly risk-taking behaviors.	<i>"I have a death wish", "I'm a psycho.", etc.</i>	We're creating extreme emotions to find a sense of excitement. Conquer fear. Play with death as an escape.
Addictive behaviors: e.g., drugs, alcohol, gambling, sex, eating/dieting, shopping, exercising, etc.	<i>"I'm sick", "I'm no good", etc.</i>	We're numbing and distracting from pain and self-negating thoughts. Trying to not feel physically bad.

The greater clarity we have about how trauma works and the impact of trauma on our lives, the more we can see ourselves in a more realistic and positive way. This step inspires us to heal and lightens our internal resistance to it. Healing now becomes much easier to do.

Activities: (The following activities can be done in a Healing Journal and/or with the support of others.)

Activity 1: Healing Journal Activity:

- Talk with peers about how some of the traumas influenced the coping behaviors you have struggled with in your life.
- Make an “Understanding Coping Behaviors Chart” for yourself.
 - a. For safe pacing, finish one coping behavior and its myths and truths before starting a new one. Take it slow and easy.
 - b. It’s often difficult to see the truth behind our own behaviors. Ask a compassionate and supportive person for input when you feel safe enough to do so.

Activity 2: Developing compassion:

- If the trauma occurred to others, what compassionate things could you say to them? Say these things to yourself.
- Having compassion for others in Vital Cycles helps to develop compassion for oneself. Notice the empathy you have for others’ pain.