



right recovery

Our understanding of trauma today is simultaneously more robust and more dis-integrated than ever before. The more we as a culture become obsessed with science, the less we seem to recognize or value the role of community norms in our dealing with trauma – and the more science and awareness around trauma, the more those norms change.

Trauma, and the recovery from it, is a complex blend of many factors – some of them physiological, some of them psychological. Community relationships, access to support, the attitudes towards difficulty and disaster that have built over the course of a life, personal movement habits, nutrition, even the health and diet of grandparents and ancestors – all this and more play into our ability to process and recover from trauma.

Which means, there's no one-size-fits-all answer. We live in a culture that wants the “right” answer to be black-and-white, so in a situation like this, where I may suggest things that are very different than someone else might suggest, our normative response is towards polarity: if what I am saying is correct, what other people have said is wrong. In most cases, it doesn't really work that way! In specific reference to trauma, I find it more helpful to acknowledge that there are many recovery options, and that each person's path to recovery will look different. So in presenting these options, I am not negating the validity of any other options, I'm simply adding things that will be useful for some people and which can be combined with other therapies as needed to provide the best benefit for each person's journey.

story

Story is so utterly critical to who we are as human beings. It's why we love television and movies so much: throughout history, we sat in the evenings and listened to the stories of who we were as a people, who we were as individuals, how we should behave, where we came from, where we're going. This is as much true today as it has ever been, but the source of the stories has changed somewhat: instead of the elders, our stories come from Hollywood, and instead of stories that extol the kind of virtues that tell us to value our communities and help each other, we have stories that value fame and fortune, and individualism.

We tell ourselves stories every day, as well – all day long, and often we're not even aware of it. Immediately you may feel the urge to disengage here, because when someone says “you're just telling yourself a story”,



we have some pretty specific and often defensive feelings about that. We may respond with “this is a real medical condition” – as if using the word “story” was a form of invalidation. Often our culture does use the word “story” to invalidate. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t build our own narratives internally. We tell ourselves we’re bad because we didn’t get some particular task done, we tell ourselves we’re alone and no one understands how we feel, we tell ourselves that we’re angry about a thing that happened. On a good day, we might tell ourselves about happiness and about the people we love and who love us!

The stories we tell ourselves, and the stories we expose ourselves to, are often in our own control*. We can tell ourselves the stories of our own depression, or we can tell ourselves that “sometimes you’re up, sometimes you’re down”, and that feeling down sometimes gives us a way to appreciate the deliciousness of feeling up. We can tell ourselves that no one understands, or we can spend time talking to others about their feelings, realizing that actually, we all have the same kinds of feelings even if we feel them in the context of different experiences. Taking control of these stories is critical to our emotional health! That isn’t to say that simply telling yourself a nice story will solve all your problems, but often we can use this facet of human-being-ness to help us get some measure of control in a situation that has taken that away from us.

**This way of managing our stories is only “often” in our control: there are situations of emotional abuse and other factors where the stories we are hearing are breaking us down and are not in our immediate control. I want to acknowledge that reality.*

How do we do it? Start off by just being aware of your daily story. What do you tell yourself all day? What things do you hear when other people are talking? If they say, “Good job! Let’s just fix these few things and we’re done!” – do you hear “good job”, or do you hear “you’re not good enough”? This beginning exercise isn’t about trying to change anything, it’s only about building awareness for what is happening.

In the second step, we’re ready to make changes! We can start recognizing when people offer to help, and choose to say, “yes, thank you!” instead of “I’m fine” – the latter leads to later telling the story that no one wants to help us. We can start to change the stories we tell ourselves about self-worth: instead of feeling bad about ourselves for work that didn’t get finished, we can identify what caused the delay, and recognize the places we could or could not have gotten control of that, acknowledge that in the given situation, this is what happened, and move on with some new data and a new strategy for tomorrow.



It's also important to monitor the stories that are being told to us: what stories do we choose to listen to? What stories do we surround ourselves with? We can choose stories of hope and perseverance, we can choose stories with heroes we admire! We don't have to be stuck with the stories fed to us in mainstream media, often filled with selfishness, greed, and corruption. We can build our reservoir of stories – they are out there.

Having a community that shares our stories is also important. If we think about stress and trauma in historical terms - historically there are of course many examples of traumatic situations where people did not have healthy recovery options available, but if we intentionally choose a health one on which to model our ideas, we can build some ideas about how story and community can help us in recovery. When someone was chased by a tiger, but made it back to their village alive, everyone shared the story of their adventure. They were the local hero, and songs or poems were composed about their experience – and most importantly, these stories portrayed the experience in terms of survival and heroism! When we think about traumatic or stressful experiences today, do we see them in this heroic light? Often it's just get-back-to-work, or some other critical response. Finding a community that will sing your triumph, instead of echoing the refrain of your sadness and frustration, is tremendously valuable.

The work of Pema Chödrön has been of great value to me in looking at my own stories, and how I can use them to understand my experiences.

movement

Movement is critical to recovery from trauma in every aspect of the word. Bessel van der Kolk has been a pioneer in this work over the last several decades, looking at how actual physical movement can help trauma recovery even when talking about trauma can't. The reality is that emotions are not nebulous: they are physiological, and moving our emotions does require moving our bodies as well. There's no one particular right best way to do that, though yoga is often used as a baseline. But whatever kind of physical movement a person enjoys can play a significant role.

Movement is important at every level. A big part of the work we do with story involves movement. Let's take the example of a natural disaster, in which a particular person suffers great physical trauma and witnesses the deaths of others as well – great emotional trauma. This person manages, with struggle, to make their way to the first aid station: in this moment, simultaneously while physiological first aid is taking place,



psychological first aid can also be taking place! We can, as we receive this person, help them move their story – especially given that at that moment, they may not be able to do so themselves. We can acknowledge the parts of the timeline that have already happened and then consciously help them to build the next point: a terrible thing happened, there was suffering, you were injured, others died, you struggled to get to help, AND you arrived! You’re here, you’re safe, you have community. You are no longer alone.

In first aid situations, providing space for people to share their stories, to be honored for their struggle, and to reinforce that they are now safe with community and no longer alone, is tremendously powerful: their story is MOVING. If we can also give them the physical work of recovering others – whether that is helping clear mud out of someone’s basement, helping other injured people to get to safety, delivering water, or even rolling bandages or doing administrative work in the clinic – at this point their story has moved again, from “a terrible thing happened TO me” to “I survived and was not alone” to “I overcame and helped others”. While this doesn’t make the situation any less terrible, it does create an emotional construct that is much less likely to experience PTSD from the event – simply because the person’s story includes an amount of control in the situation.

Knowing that this can be successful in a large natural disaster type situation, how can we apply this concept to trauma that is more personal? What kinds of safe community can we create for people who have experienced trauma? How can we give a person the message “you’re safe now”? What can we do to help a person regain a feeling of control in the situation? This will be different for every person’s own situation; asking these questions of ourselves - and often even of the person who has experienced trauma! – can help us create environments of movement and ultimately of recovery.

herbs that move us

tulsi – *Ocimum sanctum*

In old herb books, you’ll often see that Tulsi can “move stuck emotions”. That sounds exactly like what we’re looking for! In new scientific studies, we are starting to get some ideas as to how that happens. Tulsi is my very favorite “herb for bad feelings” – whether those feelings are “I got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning”, “I’m grumpy and emotionally upset due to strong PMS symptoms”, “I’m craving a thing I’ve been



addicted to and resisting it is difficult”, all the way through to PTSD, even years after the fact. How can one herb have all of those effects?

There’s never one explanation for how an herb works, but one particularly interesting factor for Tulsi is its interaction with the hippocampus – the section of the brain where we process short-term memories and experiences into long-term memories. When the hippocampus is exposed to prolonged high levels of cortisol, it shrinks and its functioning is compromised. However, the hippocampus is a part of the brain that can regenerate, and has its own stem cells to do so. Tulsi stimulates those stem cells, which allows your body to stop holding traumatic events in the present tense and to process them into your past-tense long term storage.

Tulsi also has benefits to the HPA axis and other aspects of the endocrine system, as well as considerable volatile oil content with effects that range from anti-microbial to anti-inflammatory, and more. Of particular note is recent research connecting chronic high levels of inflammation with depression.

Take Tulsi in tea – it has a very pleasant flavor – tincture, or elixir. If you make a long-infusion of the tea, covered to retain the volatile oils, you will also get some significant mineral content!

ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*)

Ashwagandha is another plant found to stimulate regrowth in the hippocampus, which makes it effective in the same sorts of ways that Tulsi can be. An adaptogen, Ashwagandha also has beneficial action on the HPA axis and other parts of the endocrine system. Particularly noticeable in human behavior is Ashwagandha’s impact on cycle.

Ashwagandha is excellent at re-regulating the sleep/wake cycle, and is of particular benefit in cases of depression with lack of energy to do anything during the day leading to insomnia at night. This cycle focus can also help in situations of ebb instead of flow: our current culture focuses only on the positive, and many of us not only are not given great tools for dealing with the “down time” of life – times when we feel introspective or like hibernating – but our culture actively devalues these types of feelings. Ashwagandha can really aid in recognizing that it’s alright to take the time we need to recover.

Ashwagandha can be taken powdered in food or smoothies, though it has a somewhat bitter flavor. Decocted with stronger flavors such as cinnamon or ginger, it’s quite nice. Capsules are also available.



wood betony (*Stachys off.*)

Wood Betony gently draws one back into the body across a wide spectrum of dissociative causes from traumatic experience to overwhelming cerebral input to just a too-busy or too cerebral day. Betony is handy in the moment of trauma but is particularly great as an aid in long term recovery. Traditionally, betony is also taken for concussion – having your head rattled. Betony is also excellent in recovering from flashbacks, and keeping a person grounded in the present.

Betony is best as tea or tincture, and has a mild flavor.

ginger (*Zingiber officinale*)

Warming, soothing, and antispasmodic, Ginger is usually considered a digestive herb or a circulatory stimulant. With the strong connections between gut health and mental health, it's not surprising that Ginger can be relaxing to the emotions as well, but the antispasmodic action isn't limited to the GI tract. The circulatory stimulant action isn't limited just to blood, either – getting your blood moving gets everything else moving too, but in a warm and soothing kind of way. Whether it's stagnant blood flow or stagnant stuck emotions, Ginger is a great help.

Ginger is great as tea, tincture, elixir, candied or in food.

calamus (*Acorus calamus*)

Calamus is another warming stimulant, as well as being grounding and calming. A superb digestive bitter, Calamus assists in shifting into parasympathetic nervous function via the enteric nervous system. In the immediate moment of disaster, Calamus is stabilizing, especially for panic attacks, or for aid workers who can't leave to seek safer space or are starting to feel panic coming on. In recovery, Calamus is grounding especially for dissociative disorders and post-trauma digestive problems.

Calamus is bitter, but in a warming, pleasant way. It can be taken in tincture or as tea, blended with other flavors like Ginger or Angelica. Alternately, the roots can just be chewed and eventually swallowed.

ghost pipe (*Monotropa uniflora*)



Ghost Pipe is a rare and at-risk plant, and must be used with great respect, but I can't not include it here. Ghost Pipe is a plant that thrives on the stimulation of the mycelial network – the earth's own internet. Ghost Pipe is an amazing ally when our own internal network can't handle the intense stimulation of traumatic events. Ghost Pipe is also great for managing flashbacks. Ghost Pipe can control the movement of emotions that are threatening to overwhelm us.

Ghost Pipe is completely effective in very small doses – 3 drops is generally sufficient. This is particularly good since the plant can not be propagated and much of its habitat is being destroyed. 5-9 stems & flowers of the plant is all that is necessary to make a pint of tincture, which will last for years; the roots are not required.

herbal relaxers

linden (*Tilia europaea*)
hawthorn (*Crataegus spp.*)

A fantastic duo for cardiovascular and nervous health, Linden and Hawthorn are particularly helpful in cases of loss and/or abandonment. Both are also excellent for situations including palpitations, such as panic attacks. I particularly like this team for helping solidify the reality of “you're found, you're safe” once that is true. Linden and Hawthorn are very nice for assisting in recovering from flashbacks and post-even panic attacks.

Linden and Hawthorn are a delicious tea, and can be made into tincture, elixir, and syrup as well.

chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*)

Chamomile is excellent for panic attacks and recurrent panic attacks, as well as trouble sleeping. Especially when the trouble sleeping is from an inability to relax – to let down one's guard and feel safe in a safe place – Chamomile is an excellent choice. Ginger is nice as a partner, especially when there is physical tension in the body along with the panic feelings, or when the body feels cold and unable to warm up (physically or emotionally).

Chamomile is pleasant tasting as tea, and makes a great elixir when mixed with Ginger infused honey. Chamomile can also be tinctured.



sage (*Salvia off.*)

Sage is an ally for those feeling completely overwhelmed by what they're experiencing, and as if they are being controlled by the emotions that result. Sage is particularly useful when overwhelm comes with trembling. Sage is also a very good plant for aid workers who may not get a break despite feeling overwhelmed. In any aspect of life – traumatic or just run-of-the-mill stressful, I find Sage to be particularly helpful when I believe that I am out of options and there is no one who can help me with the things that must be done.

Sage can be taken as tea, tincture, elixir, or eaten fresh.

lemon balm (*Melissa off.*)

Soothing and cooling, Lemon Balm is our favorite for “heat stroke and things that look like heat stroke”, which can include anxiety with agitation/rage. Tremendously handy for the whole range from hot-heads that need to cool off, through to people who are in a state of anger or rage in reaction to their trauma. The anger may be/likely is justified and appropriate, but Lemon Balm can help cool it off to a place where it doesn't overwhelm the person experiencing it.

Lemon Balm makes a tasty tea, elixir, syrup, tincture – it can even be infused in white wine (serve chilled!).

skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*) passion flower (*Passiflora incarnata*)

These two herbs work very closely together as a team to reduce the “hamster wheel” or “merry-go-round” kind of thinking. This sort of rumination is very common during times of stress and trauma, but usually it goes nowhere – the thoughts just keep circling and don't ever really resolve. Skullcap and Passion flower, either together in tea – a cup as needed - or in tincture – 1 to 3 droppersful as needed - can help stop the circling thoughts. Neither is sedative, so they can be taken during the day, however, if circular thinking is keeping you awake at night, this team can help you get some rest.

For evening use, pulse dosing (1-3 droppersful every 15 minutes for 1-2 hours before bed) can be very effective.

Skullcap and Passionflower may be best taken in tincture, but the flavors are not disagreeable to making tea.



kava (*Piper methysticum*)

pedicularis (*Pedicularis spp.*, particularly *densiflora*)

Kava and Pedicularis both have profound muscle relaxant effects, which can help a person drop down into the body and become present – along temporal, spatial, emotional, and spiritual axes. Neither is native to this area, so working with these plants requires some planning ahead, but it can be well worth it. Additionally, Kava has quite pronounced pain-relieving effects, especially topically.

Take Kava by fresh tincture in the range of 1 to 9 droppersful, or a decoction of dried roots ideally with a fat source such as coconut or almond milke. Take Pedicularis by tincture at 1 to 5 droppersful, or as smoke. Effective both immediately, for panic attack presenting with high tension, and during recovery, for flash backs or anxiety attacks with tension.

herbal armor

motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*)

Motherwort assists in setting boundaries, both in traumatic situations and in daily life. Particularly useful when the trauma is a violation, and in rebuilding safe, healthy boundaries in that recovery process.

Motherwort also eases palpitations quite quickly - a dropperful of tincture for palpatations, every 5-10 minutes until they're past.

Motherwort is handy in tincture or in a tea blend as well, though it is somewhat bitter.

rose petal (*Rosa rugosa*)

Wild Roses provide cover for small animals from larger predators. Rose works similarly in instances of trauma and distress: providing emotional “cover”; your very own cloud of safe space. Rose can help in the moment of trauma and disaster, and is especially useful for aid workers who are choosing to stay in a less-safe place in order to help others get to safety. Rose is also fantastic for long term recovery, especially when it's difficult to find emotional protection from recurrent thoughts and memories of the trauma.



Rose is great in tea, tincture, or elixir; it's particularly fun to infuse rose petals in honey.

yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)

Yarrow is armor, it is warrior medicine, and as such, fantastic for aid workers who may feel bombarded by people in need, or anyone in the moment of trauma when it's apparent that the situation is not entirely safe yet. Yarrow is fantastic for anyone who feels that they need a little armor, whether that's because they're emotionally (or still physically!) wounded from traumatic events or simply because there is a contentious meeting at work.

Yarrow can be taken as tea, though it is somewhat bitter, or as tincture or flower essence.

aid worker's elixir (*keep going and keep it together*)

A Formula for Aid Workers

Whether responding to a local disaster or supporting a friend experiencing trauma or distress in their life, responders need support too, especially anyone providing aid over the long haul. Here's a formula I love for just this type of work:

eleuthero (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*)

Eleuthero is an adaptogen, which means that it helps the body manage stress in a fairly generalized way. Recently, adaptogens are starting to be defined as herbs that have explicit action on the HPA axis or on the stress-response functions of the endocrine system as a whole. In other words - adaptogens can help you keep going. Eleuthero is stimulating, but it has a somewhat different quality than caffeine. You definitely get the uplifting action, but it's not quite as much of a spike as caffeine can be, and it doesn't have the tendency to cause "jitters" or upset digestion. Eleuthero is fantastic when you need to keep working even in extreme conditions without enough resources - and in fact, that's how a lot of the studies on this plant were done!

angelica (*Angelica archangelica*)

Angelica is a plant of extremes - it lives most happily up near the Arctic Circle, where it's either all day or all night. Even in the summer, though the sun is out 20+ hours a day, it's never really warm. Angelica is a tall plant with a large, heavy flower head, and yet it's stem is a strong spine that can support that weight even in forceful winds. Angelica can give



you energy to last through extremes without losing your balance, and to support others even when you're feeling tossed about.

rhodiola (*Rhodiola rosea*)

Rhodiola is another Arctic Circle plant. It thrives on extreme rocky outcroppings and can hold things together. Often this plant is touted as an "anti-depressant", but traditionally it was thought of more as an endurance plant. Imagine Vikings rowing in open boats across cold seas - physically, that's a tremendous feat. When you can't see the shore (and might not for a few days), everything is grey and damp and cold, and you just have to keep moving without losing your internal compass: that's Rhodiola!

yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)

Yarrow is a battlefield plant - traditionally it was an ally to wounded soldiers. And of course, with its strong ability to staunch bleeding, it's easy to see why. But the protective qualities of Yarrow were so strong that in naming the plant, botanists reference Achilles, who was protected (or "armored"!) against all harm except for the place on his heel where his mother held him to dip him into the magic river. Physiologically, we work with Yarrow for bleeding, and emotionally that can be true too - to prevent your own resources from bleeding out of you while you're supporting others. But the mythology behind Yarrow - though we haven't invented the microscope that can explain it yet - also plays a part: Yarrow is like "emotional armor". When you need to be strong in difficult situations, when you need to put on your armor and head out to the emotional battlefield, Yarrow has an amazing shielding quality.

Blend a strong decoction or make a tincture of these plants in equal parts. I like to add something sweet – maple syrup would be my first choice, or molasses, because of the mineral content and nourishing aspect, though honey is also a good choice. Just like chocolate helps you recover from the emotional onslaught of the Dementors in the Harry Potter stories, there's something particularly magical about the ability of sweet things to feel soothing in difficult times!

Consume freely as needed. And of course, once you and your community are safe, let yourself sleep for a week!

This formula is fantastic whether you're working in a first aid tent after a natural disaster, supporting a loved one through hospice care, or even "just" supporting your teenager as they navigate the pits and falls of high school!