

Recovering from Past Painful Experiences

Low self-esteem can be deeply rooted, with origins in traumatic childhood experiences such as prolonged separation from parent figures, neglect, or emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. In later life, self-esteem can be undermined by ill health, negative life events such as losing a job or getting divorced, deficient or frustrating relationships, and a general sense of lack of control. This sense of lack of control may be especially marked in victims of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, or victims of discrimination.

Past painful experiences such as those described above, can continue to speak negative, hurtful messages to us deep within our emotional, psychological and spiritual core. They can hold power over our image of ourselves long after the experience has passed. For this reason, it can be helpful to go back to that painful experience and establish the truth of it in the light of day. These painful experiences can be de-mystified, and relieved of their power over us. Lies can be revealed and truth can become the new message.

Use the following template for each painful experience causing you emotional, psychological or spiritual pain today. The three examples listed in the template are there to help you understand your specific painful experience and do not necessarily have anything to do with your situation.

(Be sure to write out your thoughts in complete sentences)

1. Identify the painful experience

- When did it take place?
- Where were you?
- Who was involved?
- What was done to you, or by you?



2. Describe the pain you felt

- Use at least 5 of your own 'feeling words' in your description to describe the pain (*examples below*)
 - *wounded, attacked, alone, hopeless, judged, used, betrayed, lied to, misunderstood, isolated, devalued*

3. Discern fault and assign blame

- List all the people who were at fault in the experience and what they did wrong (*examples below*)

- *“My father was at fault for molesting me sexually”*
 - *“My spouse was at fault for cheating on me”*
 - *“I was at fault for drinking too much and getting drunk”*
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- Write a statement assigning blame for each person at fault
(examples below)

- *“I blame my father for hurting me, using me for his own pleasure, not protecting me, and making me feel worthless”*
 - *“I blame my spouse for lying to me, breaking his/her promises to me, sleeping with someone else, refusing to communicate with me, and not valuing me and our relationship”*
 - *“I blame myself for not maintaining control and for making poor decisions”*
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4. Determine motives and the resulting false belief

- Write a statement identifying as best as you can, the motives of each person at fault
(examples below)

- *“My father’s **motive** was to satisfy his own pleasure, and to exert power and control over me and others. My father’s actions created a **false belief** that I am not worthy of love, without value, a tool to be used for someone else’s pleasure, and must always submit my needs to the needs of others”*
- *“My spouse’s **motive** was to meet his/her own needs, experience selfish pleasure, and send a destructive message of being unhappy in our relationship. My spouse’s actions created a **false belief** that I cannot ever trust again, that I am not worthy of someone working hard on a relationship with me, and that I am flawed and unable to have a happy and satisfying mutual relationship”*
- *“My **motive** was to escape my pain and let go completely. My actions created a **false belief** that struggle has no purpose, I am unable to endure pain, I do not control my life, and I am defined by the poor decisions I make in life”*

5. Decide to move forward

- Write a statement of resolution for each person at fault
 - *“I resolve that my father’s actions will be judged by a higher power, so I choose to turn over punishment to that higher power, and accept the reality that my father was a deeply flawed person, and that I am not responsible for his actions”*

 - *“I resolve that my spouse’s actions will be judged by a higher power, so I choose to turn over punishment to that higher power, and accept the reality that my spouse’s actions were a result of his/her flawed character, and that I am not responsible for his/her actions”*

 - *“I resolve that my actions were the result of poor decisions, and placed me in a vulnerable and compromised position. I ask my higher power to forgive me, and I choose to forgive myself and learn from my painful experience. I am guilty of making poor decisions, but I will not be defined by my poor decisions. I will make better decisions in the future”*

- **Write a statement of new belief based on truth for each false belief**
 - *“I am worthy of love, a person of great value, a person who may or may not choose to bring pleasure to another, and my needs are just as important as the needs of others”*

 - *“I can learn to trust again, and to identify the signs of someone building trust with me; if necessary, I deserve someone working hard on a relationship with me because I am a person of worth and value, and because I bring value to a relationship, I can have a happy and satisfying mutual relationship with someone who sees me for who I am”*

 - *“I believe there is value in struggle and I do not have to escape pain to be happy; I am able to endure pain, and I control the decisions I make in my life, and I will be defined by the overwhelming number of good decisions I make in life”*
