A handy resource of validation, encouragement, and hope for all who have survived the trauma of abuse.

It’s my hope and sincere desire that this short, easy to read book will become a source of validation, encouragement, and deep knowing that you can Survive, Thrive, and Conquer your Grief.

SURVIVE - THRIVE - CONQUER

A resource from SurvivingMyPast.net
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EXPERIENCE GRIEF IN IT'S OWN TIME

Grief is something that we all face at some point in our lives. Whether it’s the loss of a loved one, trusted family pet, loss of a job, past trauma and abuse, and host of other scenarios that unfold during our lifetime.

Generally speaking, I know that I have problems trying to connect with what I know I should be feeling or what I think I’m feeling. Be careful with that word “should”, it can be very self-shaming and invalidating.

It’s one thing to say to myself, “I have peace about this...” or “I know that things will work out somehow” (even if I don’t know how just yet), but to truly sit with and embrace that mindset can be quite difficult. I have a habit of trying to rush through one feeling to get through the next.

It can be a challenge to try to convince myself that it’s natural and normal to feel the way that I do. In trying to feel those feels and be OK with it, I am also trying to force those feelings to surface and then move on according to my timetable rather than when they are ready too.

Each traumatic event that happens in our life causes us to experience the 5 stages of grief.
1. Denial  
2. Anger  
3. Bargaining  
4. Depression  
5. Acceptance

We have to accept the fact that each stage is important and comes with its own set of feelings, and that it’s necessary to feel each one in its own time and its own way.

When we are able to sit with each of those steps, and be content with how they make us feel, without trying to force some type of internal response, our healing will go much smoother.

It’s worth noting that once we do get to step 5, Acceptance, it doesn’t mean that everything is peachy keen and all is right with our world. It just means that we accept what has happened and are ready to start moving forward.

We are leaving behind those circumstances that brought us to the grieving process and forging ahead with the knowledge we acquired, and the confidence gained that we can indeed handle what life gives us.

By embracing the feelings of the traumatic events that unfolded in our life, we can learn from it, and be better equipped to handle a similar circumstance in the future.

It’s important to keep in mind that just because we get to step 5, doesn’t mean that we won’t have to relive those feelings ever again. It’s not uncommon to go back and experience those emotions again.

For that matter, also bear in mind that not everyone experiences the Stages of Grief in the same way or in the same order. We are all different, and that is why it’s so paramount to sit with and explore our feelings in our own way and time.
Being triggered can cause those memories to come back and make us feel angry or sad again, and that’s OK. The good part is, we won’t have to sit with it as long. Since we already went through the stages of grieving in their own time, without rushing, it doesn’t have to overtake our existence as much as it did the first time.

As odd as that may sound, I can speak from experience and tell you that it’s happened to me. When those emotions come back, I will sit with them for a while but I can look back on what I went through and use that as a new tool in my Survivor Toolbox.

Healing is a slow process, so remember, don’t try and rush through steps 1-4, just to get to step 5.
DENIAL - THERE'S NO WAY THIS HAPPENED TO ME!

If you Google the word, Denial, you will get the following: the action of declaring something to be untrue.

Further research shows us, as explained on ChangingMinds*: Denial is simply refusing to acknowledge that an event occurred. Denial is a form of repression, where stressful thoughts are banned from memory. If I do not think about it, then I do not suffer the associated stress of dealing with it.

So, what does this mean to me personally? How do I experience Denial? How do you experience Denial?

When I first started to deep dive into the abuse of my past; exploring the suppressed memories that had been kept hidden away in the box at the bottom of the closet in my mind, the very first thing I said was...

"There’s no way!"

- There is no way in hell that I allowed a teenager to get me alone in his house, time after time, and use me for his own pleasure. Touching me, molesting me, and making me cry.

- What human being would experience that type of sadistic trauma, and then find a way to not deal with it for so many years...decades! Nope, didn’t happen!
o I could not have gone on with my life, had 3 kids, held down a job, and just basically survived if things went down the way these memories are telling me they did.

o It couldn’t have been as bad as all this, I must be over dramatizing it, making it out to be way worse than it really was.

o This must all just be a result of a scary movie I saw as a kid, or stories I heard about from other kids, and now I’m thinking it happened to me too when it really didn’t?

I’ve said those things out loud in sessions and unknowingly I was already starting the healing process before I even knew I had to heal in the first place.

When we question all of this, and say things like “this abuse didn’t really happen, and that I must be over dramatizing it”, we are starting to dig through that box in the bottom of the closet and explore what’s inside.

I’m using my own terminology there because it’s how I relate and literally what I said aloud.

It’s not an overnight process, and as always, I encourage you to always seek the help of a professional when you are ready to explore your past. You need to be in a safe place, with a safe person, who understands trauma and your situation so you can be best supported during this time of questioning.

I kept that box of memories buried under a pile of junk, hidden away for so long that I couldn’t believe what was in there. I was in total denial and disbelief at what my mind was cluing me into. Our minds know when we are ready to start healing, we just have to be open to what feelings will surface and be willing to put in the time and effort required.

Allow yourself to sit with Denial, not shame yourself for your feeling, and not rush through why you think what you experienced simply didn't happen.

You are amazing, you are awesome, and always know that YOU matter, friend!
ONE STEP AT A TIME

DON'T LOOK TOO FAR AHEAD IN YOUR HEALING JOURNEY.

THE NEXT STEP IS RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU.

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ANGER - WHY DID THIS HAPPEN TO ME?

After we’ve sat with Denial for as long as we needed too, the next phase typically is Anger.

We go from, “there’s no way this happened to me” to “why in the hell did this happen to me?!”

Why was I dealt this hand, what did I do to deserve this?! I didn’t ask to be born into a life of sexual abuse, domestic violence, narcissistic abuse, or any other type of trauma.

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve said this to myself, both in the past and as my healing journey continues. Before I started seeking help and confronting all of these memories, I would ask myself those questions simply because I didn’t understand that I was a survivor.

I just felt like I was life’s personal whipping boy, or being bullied by Karma for something I must have done in the past.

Once I realized I was a survivor of abuse, I still asked myself these questions. To be honest I don’t have all of the answers. I do know the answer to one though, it’s not Karma deciding to make an example out of me.

It can be so hard to accept that we didn’t deserve to be abused, trafficked, mistreated, starved, or anything else. Part of that acceptance of realizing what we went through means that we have to sit with the anger for a time.
Once we come to the realization that something bad did happen to us, or that we lost someone special to us “insert any experience you can relate too here”, we can use Anger as a bridge to healing.

We can’t be mad at something if we don’t accept that it happened to us, right? Now that we accept it, it’s time to get pissed off about it for a while.

Who in the hell does that kid up the street think he is; preying on a young elementary school aged kid?! How sadistic and disgusting do you have to be to want to touch and force yourself on a little child!

I’m sorry, but no matter what happened to him in his life or what he was subjected too that got him to this point; that’s no excuse. He’ll get no such relief from me!

He screwed up my life before it ever had a chance to get started and help set the tone for a lifetime of invalidation and emotional struggle.

Because he took away my innocence and my ability to speak up, I wasn’t able to stand up to the bullies in school who constantly beat me to an emotional pulp. It was all I could do to keep from crying in school most days.

I saved that crying for when I got home, hoping to find relief from my parents. The one place that we should all be able to feel safe and cared for and validated.

Unfortunately if you are a survivor of narcissistic abuse too, you know that having a safe place to come home too wasn’t your true reality.

So, am I mad at my mother for how I was treated and raised? Am I mad at my abuser for what he did? You bet I am!

Whatever trauma you experienced in your younger years or faced later in life... you got hurt, and there’s nothing wrong with being angry.
I’m not advocating that we become violent and hurtful towards ourselves or others. That’s not expressing this emotion in a healthy way and likely will only lead to more turmoil for ourselves and those around us.

Set those healthy boundaries, keep clear of those you who hurt you. There’s nothing wrong with telling the person who wronged you that you are angry; that you need time and distance to deal with your feelings.

You don’t have to get sucked into an argument or some invalidating conversation where blame gets turned back on you.

Write in a journal about how angry you are. Write a song about it. Do some artwork or crafts. Whatever coping skills you have in your toolbox, get them out and use them regularly.

Let it out, feel your feels. Talk it out, write it out, sing it out, “art” it out!

Don’t be afraid to cry those tears of hurt and anger either. How cleansing is it when we have a good cry, or multiple good cries?

I wish I could say I have a lot of experience in the crying part of healing, but alas I am still a work in progress. The few times I’ve been able to connect with it or speak with others who have, it’s been a tremendous relief.

I definitely encourage you to speak to a professional if you have access to one, and allow them to help you through this and every stage of grieving your past. If you can’t do that, then at least speak with a trusted friend, one that understands you, won’t judge you, and won’t encourage unhealthy actions during this time in your life.

You friend, you fellow survivor, you are validated in being angry. Feel it as you need to and let yourself “get it all out” in whatever healthy way you can.

In time, you’ll be crossing that bridge onto the next phase of healing. On your own timetable.
I WILL FIND A WAY TO OVERCOME MY PAST, BECAUSE I'M BETTER THAN WHAT HAPPENED TO ME
BARGAINING - THE GUILT OF "WHAT IF" AND "IF ONLY"

This one can be particularly difficult to endure. Not that the other stages are not difficult, but Bargaining in particular can bring with it a lot of guilt. Not only are we working through all of the other emotions, but now guilt makes us feel even worse.

It’s important to look at Bargaining in two ways: the “What if” and the “If only”.

“What if”. Here is where we try and make a deal with ourselves, or perhaps our higher power; both of which I have tried to bargain with many times.

We can bargain with God. We think that if we offer to do something or change ourselves, that the pain will go away. That we’ll be able to deal with emotions and not feel so overwhelmed.

- God, what if I promise to go to church every Sunday.
- God, what if I do more good deeds in the community, or go on that weekend retreat.
- God, what if I promise to read the Bible more.

We can bargain with ourselves. We try to convince ourselves that if we turn our life around that good things will happen to us.

- If I treat my siblings better, my friends better, maybe they’ll like me more and that will help me forget about what happened quicker.
o Maybe if I just keep myself busy and not think about it, it will just go away.

o I’ll just start doing stuff for everyone else, then I won’t have time to be so miserable.

These lists are endless and I’m sure you have your own options that you’ve presented to yourself. You can see where guilt can creep up and get a hold of you in these scenarios. When we don’t follow through with our promises, or we don’t think we’ve done enough, we feel guilty.

Guilt makes us feel even more broken, more stuck, more miserable, and more helpless. On top of what we can’t change (but are trying too), now we can’t fulfill the agreement we made with God or ourselves.

It’s no win situation and it makes us feel helpless.

The other part of Bargaining is the “If Only...”. Here is where the guilt can really take over. Just think of all the “if only” statements that come to mind in any situation, let alone trauma recovery! Again, the list is endless, but here are some that I have used.

o If only I had not gone back to that teenager’s house so many times, I wouldn’t have been hurt and I wouldn’t be in therapy right now.

o On that note, if only I had never wandered down the street that fateful day in the first place. None of this would have happened.

o If only I had the guts to stand up to the bullies in middle school, I wouldn’t have been pushed around and been so much of an outcast.

Talk about guilt!
We are trying to tell ourselves that we should have done something that we weren’t capable of doing at the time. We are trying to hold ourselves accountable for something we couldn’t understand then. We are thinking with an adult mind, about the events that may have happened to us when we were a child.

Early on in our recovery journey especially, we often find it hard to give ourselves a break. We think we should have done this or could have done that. Those “shoulds” are not relegated to only early recovery either. It takes a long time to learn to be kind to ourselves and not place so much blame and responsibility on our younger selves.

*Trust me, I totally get it. It’s hard for me too.*

That’s the thing about abuse recovery. It’s about realizing that we couldn’t control what happened to us. We had no idea what was even going on and why; why it was so bad and why it wasn’t just normal behavior. On top of that if we were children at the time, trying to say that we had the power to fend off an adult who was hurting us...well, there was just no way.

"What if" and "If only" serves to make us feel like could have done more, or anything at all to keep from getting hurt. The reality is, these feelings are indeed a normal part of working through our past. We need to sit with it and not feel guilty about doing so.

Once we realize that we were groomed to not speak up and tell someone; to not try and seek help...we can know that it wasn’t our fault and we couldn’t have stopped it.

As always; continue to realize that you may very well go back through the other stages for a time; none of this grieving process is linear unfortunately.

There is hope ahead, Friend! That light at the end of the tunnel doesn’t have to be the oncoming train we think it is.
A HEALING JOURNEY IS FULL OF TRIAL AND ERROR. THE KEY IS TO JUST KEEP GOING.

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DEPRESSION - WHAT'S THE POINT OF EVEN TRYING ANYMORE?

We sit at home on a weekend, not wanting to go out because we just don’t feel like it. We don’t want to be around other people to begin with, much less happy people.

Even going to the grocery store and needing to interact with a happy cashier seems like “just too much work”.

We don’t want people to come over and try to cheer us up, because it’s either going to feel like they are placating us or we don’t to bring them down to our level because then we’d feel even worse.

Besides, they couldn’t possibly understand what we are going through anyway, right?!

I admit I’ve thought like that; totally not ashamed to admit it. It’s just reality here, friends.

It’s so much easier to sit alone in the dark, to stay at home and just sleep or watch TV, than try and fight through the sadness. The thought of picking ourselves up by our bootstraps and going on seems pointless.

We feel like we are damaged goods. We were sexually abused, raped, trafficked, abandoned, starved...insert your own experience here.

A feeling of brokeness sums it up well don’t ya think?
Why would anyone want to hang around us if they knew the truth of what we went through? We feel dirty, used up, cheap, and like we just don’t deserve to be out and about, living our life the way others are. Much less living a life we hoped to have for ourselves.

We can’t trust anyone to keep their word, and on top of that we can’t trust ourselves to make good decisions. The fewer times we have to put ourselves in a position of opening up to others and risk getting hurt, or hurting someone we love, the more justified we feel. We can rationalize that so easily…I know because I’ve done it.

This stage can last a very long time, because depression has a way of getting ahold of us and not so easily letting go.

For survivors, this is a very frustrating time too.

Not only are we depressed because we are aware of the emotional and physical trauma we endured, but we may have suffered from depression before we ever knew why in the first place.

Talk about a double whammy!

A study by King’s College in London showed that after reviewing 26,000 people, those who experienced at least 1 of the following situations as a child were more than twice as likely to experience depression as an adult.

- Rejecting interaction from their mother.
- Harsh discipline reported by a parent.
- Unstable caregiver throughout childhood.
- Self-reports of harsh physical or sexual abuse.

So, once we come to grips that we were twice as likely to experience depression, we get even more depressed. Then we find out why we are feeling depressed, and it gets even worse.
The whole situation is a chain reaction, and it’s like, can we catch a break?!

Exploring our past is deep, powerful, work and the truth is painful to accept.

We need to be aware of how intense these feelings are, and not try to go it alone. I know it sounds cliché, trust me I get it, but it really is important to seek out help.

By now what do we have to lose? The status quo has gotten us nowhere fast so far right?!

We stay home, secluded in our safe room, away from a cruel world who doesn’t know why we feel the way that we do. While it’s true that not everyone understands, we can’t use that as a reason to stay closed off from the world forever.

We never go out, we never feel better, we just keep recycling in our minds, how miserable and broken we are.

You deserve more than that, whether you believe it or not right now. Once you do start to embrace that you can sit with the depression and slowly crawl your way out, it can be a very powerful. You start to believe what others have told you and what you wanted to believe for yourself all along.

When you break down your feelings and analyze them with someone who understands, you can start to piece together why you feel the way you do. You can begin to see that there is a healing light in the distance. It may not have been present before, but it begins to shine just a little bit brighter.

I challenge myself as I write this and I challenge you, to accept that it’s normal to go through depression during your survivor journey. Sit with it, feel it, embrace it, but most importantly seek out help to work through it so it doesn’t continue to rule your life.

There is hope and there is healing, and the fact that we’ve come this far means that freeing feeling of Acceptance is ahead just waiting for us with open arms.
YOU ARE:
STRONGER THAN YOU FEEL.
SMarter THAN YOU THINK.
MORE RESILIENT THAN YOU REALIZE

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ACCEPTANCE - NOW IT'S TIME TO MOVE FORWARD WITH HOPE!

It’s worth mentioning in this context, Acceptance goes hand in hand with Radical Acceptance. In fact, as far I’m concerned, they are one in the same.

Radical Acceptance doesn’t suggest that we are OK with what happened, or that we approve of it, any more than it should tell us to try and minimize that trauma we suffered. Rather though, it’s all about realizing that something terrible and horrific did happen to us, but that we are not doomed to dwell on it forever.

It doesn’t have to dictate our future. We have control of our future...we do not have control of the past.

There is Hope! Man, that’s a powerful statement isn’t it?! I mean sit back and really think about that word. Say it to yourself a few times right now. Embrace that it's true for YOU.

Isn’t that what acceptance is all about? Having hope for a future we dream of even in light of a traumatic past?

Being able to focus on Hope and look forward to what life has in store for us because of the mindset we create for ourselves through the healing process; well that's just some amazing stuff right there! If you really embrace that, you can feel yourself being empowered even as you say those words.
Hope can be a serious driving force in healing from grief. We can’t see it right away when we are denying that somebody sexually abused us. Or when we are mad as hell because our parents abandoned us.

We may be able to see some hope when we are bargaining with ourselves, or God, that if we do this or that, we’ll feel better. But it’s short lived, because coming to the realization that we can’t bargain our way out of the past can lead back into depression.

For that matter, it’s definitely difficult to embrace hope when we are neck deep in sorrow, feeling like there is no reason to go on. No reason to think our life can ever turn out like we once dreamed it would when we were younger.

With Acceptance, it’s a very powerful feeling when you can rationally look at what happened to you and say to yourself, “I’m not going to let these event(s) define who I am any longer.”

Yes, what happened me to was quite possibly the worst thing anyone could imagine, but I have to find a way to overcome it, and I will! At this point it’s important to be able to say to yourself that you are no longer going to “try to heal, try to accept your past and move on” … it’s about actually doing it.

You wake up each day going about your life, and any time you start of feel yourself sliding backwards and doubting your worth and abilities; you now know you have the power to combat those feelings.

To quote one of my favorite movies, “The world meets nobody half way.”

If you want to heal then you have to go after it, and not give up! You’ve been dealt a hand that nobody should have been dealt in life, but you are still here and you are an example of what it means to be a survivor!
Accept that your past wasn’t the perfect childhood that you read about in story books; but know you are still worthy of every good thing in life just as much as anyone else. And go after it!

Of course, there will be rough days, times when you want to tell your therapist to go jump in a lake. Times when you want to give up and just stay locked away in your room again, to feel depressed. Times when you will doubt your abilities.

Look at those feelings with a wise mind, because you know that you have already survived so much and there’s nothing in life that you can’t overcome if you put your mind to it.

I hope this series has helped you in some way, and if there's one last thing I would like to convey to you friend...Never Give Up!

Remember, You Rock!

- Matthew Pappas
WE CANNOT CHANGE THE PAST, BUT WE CAN LEARN FROM IT TO CHANGE OUR FUTURE.

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IN CLOSING

As survivors of abuse, any type of abuse, our world was turned upside down before we ever had a chance to do anything about it. We live each day with a past that haunts us, yet we continue striving to find normalcy, enjoyment, and contentment in our existence.

We would not choose this hand we’ve been dealt, or wish it on anyone else, but it’s ours and we must own it. Being a survivor means we overcome, it’s just what we do. And when we move from Surviving, to Thriving, we can Conquer anything!

Friend and Survivor, always know that you are worth fighting for, no matter that voice in your head or anyone else tries to tell you.

You Got This!
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I hope you’ll consider joining me on this healing journey by checking out my blog & podcasts, and following me on social media.

Let’s Rock Our Survivor Journey Together

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