

Accepting our Broken Bits: Never "Over It" But Still Healing

by Louise 2011

For reasons that will become obvious further on, the title of this article is a nod to the wonderful [Shy Keenan](#), activist and survivor of horrific child sexual and other abuse.

This article is also dedicated to Susan with loving thanks, and to survivor/author Marla Handy for a fantastic book and DVD

Introduction

This article is for all who carry the scars of child sexual abuse, other child abuse, rape or domestic violence. It is for those who still experience fallout years or decades later, and it is most certainly for those who castigate themselves for not being "over it." I hope it brings comfort and kinship to such survivors. Also, what you are getting is *my* experience and my understanding of it, so take what feels right for you if anything, and leave the rest, okay?

About me

The first twenty years of my life were filled with violence and threat. I am a survivor of child sexual abuse and rape, as well as physical battering and emotional abuse. Nobody at all was in my corner, and I made a serious suicide bid at twelve years old, which I am now thankful to have survived. Later, I experienced domestic violence from a partner who almost killed me. I am nearly forty-five years old at the time of this writing, and I have had some excellent quality counselling and support over the years, which has enabled me to overthrow some of the serious impacts in my life. Yet, I still have times of being triggered, which can bring about waves of fear, sadness, anger and other symptoms of the Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder I've had for a long time. While this can be highly unpleasant, I'm going to share in this article how I've learned to be okay with periods of ongoing fallout. I should say that I have spent many years throughout adulthood feeling apologetic and embarrassed for still being affected by my history. This seems, mercifully, to have drawn to a close; indeed I feel too old and cantankerous and possibly self-respecting to

apologise anymore.

Do some things never completely heal?

At age twenty-two, I commenced counselling for child sexual abuse recovery, and read everything I could get my hands on about the topic. As I began to make sense of my experiences in new and non-destructive ways, I felt very positive. I was sure that I could conquer all, and by the time I was in my 40s my psyche would never register anymore pain about my past. I was very proactive, which is a good thing, but I was also, as I have come to understand, rather idealistic.

Two experiences from this time stand out: I was reading Frances Farmer's book, *Will there really be a morning?* when I came across a passage in which Frances described horrifying abuse, and said that her soul was pushed "beyond all healing." I went to my lovely, gentle therapist in tears; I told her that I refused to believe there is anything beyond healing – even though she said that for some people, this is the reality. This was unacceptable to me – Frances, I opined, had obviously not had the opportunity to "find the right answers"; answers that I had sworn to diligently keep searching for. I also had a survivor friend in her 40s who told me she thought there were things that never completely heal. I could not believe this, and I told her so. I mean, yeah, maybe people never get over things like the Holocaust or the death of a child, but abuse? Dreadful though it is, if you never "get over it" doesn't that mean the abusers win? I railed against the thought that some things might always hurt at least sometimes. I will never forget my friend's kind, sad, infinitely wiser than me smile.

Over the years, I discovered that it wasn't quite as simple as I'd thought it would be. I have not found answers that have healed me "completely." Three years ago, my history precipitated the development of panic disorder and agoraphobia, with PTSD symptoms much more severe than they had been for a long time. Getting better has brought about a self-acceptance that I never thought possible. Since this time, I have come to agree that there may in fact

be no such thing as completely healing from some traumatic events. And let me tell you, my friends, that acceptance of this has *been* healing in and of itself. It is in fact one of the boldest healing strides I've ever made.

Why don't some things heal completely?

My understanding is that some of the things I experienced happened in such formative years, and involved so much terror and betrayal that the roots of these experiences – and the messages they gave me – remain in the core of my personality. A dear and healing friend of mine refers to this as the “shame core.” I have worked hard to change the impact of child abuse – for example I know it was not my fault, but there is another level of me that feels irretrievably flawed...a little girl who still asks what she did to be hurt so badly. I “know” that she did nothing wrong, but many of you who have survived will know there is another, deeper layer of knowing that may contradict what our adult selves know, and we need to keep challenging it. At this point in my life, I don't believe that it will ever be possible to overturn this 100 per cent. If I have to nurse the little girl and tell her again and again that she didn't deserve it, that is okay with me.

I don't believe I will ever feel completely healed from not knowing what it is to be loved, supported and made safe by Mummy and Daddy. The abandonment was severe; it shaped parts of me. The sexual abuse that occurred has left me with a fear of certain things, fear that I have never completely erased. The losses were greater than a human child should have to bear.

I think much of why some things are beyond complete healing depends on factors such as duration of abuse, mental illness, psychological make-up and much more. It is not about how weak or strong you are; certainly I don't feel weak or defeated for accepting the way I am, I feel a great strength in it.

And, the impact of child abuse, particularly sexual abuse, can be physical: Part of the reason for feeling traumatized now for events in even the distant past is *physical*. Our bodies were not designed to handle repeated severe stressors.

Research findings indicate that the stress of early childhood trauma such as child sexual abuse, can cause actual physical changes in the brain. Traumatic memory appears to be stored differently than ordinary memory. One consequence of this is that when we're in situations that remind us - even in not-so-obvious ways, of the actual traumatic experience/s we've had, those memory tracts open up, causing us to feel as if it were happening again. Please see [this article](#). You might also like to listen to Dr. Frank Ochberg's webcast, [How Does PTSD Affect Brain Function?](#) Aphrodite Matsakis also gives an excellent explanation in her book, *I Can't Get Over It*, of the biological changes that trauma, especially if it is prolonged or severe, can bring about. These changes appear to be irreversible, but it isn't hopeless (1992 p. 39). Even if we can't change this process, we can get help to manage it to the best of our ability.

At this stage, I don't want my readers to mistake what I'm saying as negative. Acceptance that some things might never heal still can, paradoxically, hold out the promise of healing – it's just that I have needed to revise what “healing” means for me.

What is acceptance?

Accepting that we have “broken bits” as a result of the damage done to us, by no means implies apathy or giving up the quest to heal. Certainly, we can and should take steps to get help for issues that are seriously impacting on our lives and those around us. But I think it also helps to accept the fact that all of the damage will not be undone, and that sometimes, this may hurt. It means being prepared, with gentleness and respect for ourselves, for those times when our histories revisit again, triggering us into flashbacks, opening another pocket of grief, or otherwise upsetting us. It goes without saying that if you are experiencing strong negative or frightening feelings constantly, you need support. Acceptance doesn't mean feeling okay with the fact that you feel too fragile to get out of bed. But it may mean accepting the odd period of sliding under the covers, processing the pain and sitting with it until it passes.

And does accepting that we may have ongoing affects mean that abusers win? No way, my friends. We are survivors. It's not fair that we have the damage to deal with, of course, and it is healing to express our sorrow and anger at this. What really matters is what we do with our pain. Every time I am able to give the little girl in me the nurturing and comfort she didn't have instead of doing destructive things like drinking too much, that is a triumph. Honouring our pain in a way that our abusers did not permit us to do then, is a victory. If I appropriately exit a situation that is making me uncomfortable in a way reminiscent of my childhood abuse, that is good self-care – a care I once felt I did not deserve. The abusers don't win jackshit.

Acceptance also means that I understand that there are events in my past that I will never "get over" and we're going to look at this next.

What is "Getting Over it" and "Moving On"?

It can be hard to develop acceptance in an environment full of catch-phrases like "Get over it," "Get over yourself" and "Build a bridge and get over it." Blah Blah, Blah. When we hear these things, they can be really hurtful, and lead to us wondering if we are deficient in some way.

This stupid cliché, thrown at abuse survivors with boring regularity, is deficient. Survivors of other trauma cop it too – perhaps like me, you've heard the astoundingly insensitive suggestion that Jews should "get over" the Holocaust and it makes your blood boil.

What does this piece of ignorance mean? I take it to mean that we should never feel or express any more pain over events in our history. Those who say it may be ignorant of the effects of abuse and violence; they may be uncomfortable and want us to shut up, and it may even be that they're in denial about damage done to them, but the one thing they definitely are, is *wrong*. Nevertheless, many of us internalize this drivel and we get angry at ourselves for not being "over it." We feel embarrassed and ashamed for still

being affected by the things that happened to us.

Some time ago, I'd been thinking about my sexual assault at age four. This took place together with another child who was and still is very dear to me. Not only did I have to endure oral rape myself, but I had to watch this other little girl, still in nappies, go through it too, and somehow that has always seemed worse. The sights and sounds of this will probably most of the time chill my blood, send a bolt of rage to my heart and, in some cases, threaten tears. It occurred to me then that I will never get over it. I felt a powerful anger at people who use that cliché and gave myself permission, after forty-one years, to openly repudiate it – and not just with lip-service about how stupid “get over it” is, but truly from within myself. Nobody has the right to tell me how to bloody well feel over a vandalised childhood, and I don't care how long after it is. However, it's also important that we don't do this to ourselves.

I do not suggest that it is okay to be utterly destroyed every time one thinks of a past trauma. Obviously, when this happens we need help in containing the pain so that we can have the productive lives we deserve. But if to be “over it” means never feeling any more pain attached to it, this is not possible for me and this I accept. I will feel the pain, I will hold the child. And I am perfectly fine with that. It seems to me to be a much more correct response than the years of numbness.

“Moving On” or “Moving Forward” are other common phrases, often heard in survivor circles. These are not necessarily bad, but they require careful application and they shouldn't become new clichés with which we give ourselves a hard time. Many of us can evaluate our healing and be thankful that we have *moved forward* from some difficult challenges that are now behind us.

Many of us know what it's like to feel stuck, and to need a gentle push into moving on. But this is not the same as getting over it. For me, accepting with gentleness that I may continue to experience revived pain sometimes is also

“moving on” - moving on from a place of angsting about it, blaming myself for it and trying to suppress it in destructive ways.

My friends, if you have somebody in your life who insists that it's time for you to move on from this abuse stuff, please let them know that owning, accepting and moving through your pain whenever it pops its head up IS moving on.

As for “get over it”, well, the only permission you need to heal in your way is your own. Getting over it is *not* the same thing as healing. I am over needing to be over it. There is real liberty in that. Whoopee!

Embracing Broken Bits: Healing

I have always struggled with “Broken” as a term for survivors. I came across a (now non-existent) website for rape survivors years ago; it was called “Broken Angels,” and I remember snorting dismissively that I was neither broken nor an angel. I felt that this title sounded very “victimy.” I have always hated sounding like a victim, but I now totally understand my own denial. (For a compassionate and provocative look at acceptance of “victim” see this article: [Is it Wrong to Be a "Victim"?](#)) For me to admit of brokenness seemed to give abusers too much power, leading to me feel humiliated, powerless and angry. Hadn't they taken enough already? I had a better time with the word “damaged”, though only sparingly.

My other problem with terms like “broken” is that survivors have had enough trouble with being stigmatized as perpetually FUBAR (and if you don't know what that old military expression means, click [here](#)). They are often treated like they should be wrapped in cotton wool or frankly, as if they're nuts. This is also humiliating when the fact is that although abuse – especially repeated and severe, can define parts of who we are, it is not the sum of who we are. We are not what happened to us and we are also loving parents, brilliant scientists, tireless activists, good cooks, great friends, sexy lovers, funny jokers and so much more.

One thing that has richly aided me in this journey of acceptance is reading about the life and work of survivor Shy Keenan, and I am most grateful for it. Shy describes herself as "Broken but some bits still work." And boy, how they do work – Shy's courage and work on behalf of other survivors is incredible. It occurred to me that maybe there is a way to understand the term "broken" in a way that is an honest reflection of the way things are, rather than disempowering. A variation on Shy's self-definition that works for me is, "I work, but bits of me are broken."

Also, for help and support in accepting your own broken bits and living with them, then please, please see the recommended reading below. The work of Marla Handy is absolutely the best ongoing scar-acceptance thing I have ever had access to. It is essential reading for people who have done their therapy, reading and other to "get better" but who may still have post-traumatic fallout at times. Marla will show you how to lose the pressure to be "completely healed."

I wish I could convey the respect, empathy and tenderness that I now feel for my broken bits. I am no longer ashamed of them. The healing that has taken place is the development skills to take care of them so that they don't impede me *all* the time. I no longer need it to be none of the time, and I am free to maximise ways of caring for myself when the broken bits hurt.

While, as I said above, I have spent much time apologizing to people for my fragility, this healing and acceptance means that I feel okay with asking the people who love me to accept my areas of fragility. This isn't the same as asking people to take responsibility for your feelings, or blaming them for making you feel a certain way. But don't many people – probably most - have corns that the people who love them know not to tread on? Don't most people need others to proceed with courtesy and care in some areas? Why should it be any different for me because I am an abuse survivor, and there are certain things that I don't much like? I think it's totally fair to expect respect and sensitivity from those I am close to.

And If I'm Wrong?

There are, of course, many survivors who feel that they are totally “over” what happened to them. Some of these, at least, may be people who have never had the support they deserve to feel the weight of their pain, and begin to heal.

If you are a survivor who believes that you have resolved your pain for all time, that's great. I hope it stays like that for you. If it doesn't, know that you are understood.

What If I haven't tried some special therapy, or what if a therapy is invented in the future that totally nukes traumatic fallout forever? The thing is, I actually feel relaxed and happy not striving for more ways to make it go away altogether. I will always be open to wisdoms, of course, when they appear. But I can also live, and live well, without the “answer” that banishes trauma.

For now, I have learned to honour who I am, broken bits and all, and live with it. While it is not okay to have been damaged by abuse, it is okay to be damaged, among other things. It's okay to be me.

Lastly, from a wise friend of mine from Pandora's Aquarium, some words that have furthered my acceptance the most and are a perfect summation of this article:

“Getting over it has never been a goal for me. I told my therapist that the first time I saw her. I wanted to be able to learn how to deal with the symptoms like the nightmares, the constant stress of being hypervigilant, all the things I couldn't rid myself of, but not the memories. I really didn't expect those to go away. And don't think I'd want them to if they could. It's all too integral, I'd have to deny most of the first 15 years of my life. All of the abuse from the incest on through the gang rape shaped a lot of who I am today even though it happened 34 to 45 years ago. I still have issues to work through. I might always have issues to work through. I don't see that as a bad thing. Not as long as it moves you forward.”

Highly Recommended to Read/View:

[No Comfort Zone: Notes on Living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder](#) - Marla Handy: I cannot praise this affirming, wise book, which I have recently read, highly enough. To find out why, please read [the review](#) I wrote after reading it. If you have lived with PTSD for a long time, this book will assist you in making peace with a damaged psyche without seeing yourself as any less of a person. It is absolutely essential for people with PTSD as well as therapists, friends, family and partners. Also please see the DVD [Making Peace with Chronic PTSD - Marla's Story](#) in which Marla has a conversation with Psychiatrist and Trauma expert Dr. Frank Ochberg.