

# **Five Ways Unresolved Trauma May Be Derailing Your Relationship**

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THE SOUL

**“Trauma is perhaps the most avoided, ignored, belittled, denied, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering.”**

Peter Levine, Ph.D., Waking The Tiger

**E**very couple longs for authentic connection. Charise and Tony were no exception. Before our first meeting they had been to five different marriage counselors in as many years.

Despite having a regular date night, attending marriage retreats, learning communication skills, and reading all the latest books on marriage, they found themselves stuck in a loop of pain and frustration. One moment everything would be fine. Then the next moment everything would be crazy. Sound familiar?

Here's the thing. Charise and Tony really loved each other and wanted a great marriage. But after so many failed attempts at marriage counseling, something needed to change. The stakes were high and doing more of the same wasn't going to cut it.

I've been counseling couples like Charise and Tony for over twenty-five years and here's what I've learned.

**If an intelligent, motivated couple has taken every opportunity to fix what's broken in the marriage and continue to struggle, then something crucial is not being addressed. Much of the time what's not being addressed is unresolved trauma.**

## What Exactly Is Trauma And Why Does It Matter?

At its simplest, trauma is an experience that overwhelms our ability to cope. This might be for any number of reasons like:

- The experience itself was scary, violating, or abusive.
- It happened at an early or impressionable age.
- It was a repeated event.
- It happened alongside other stressful life events.
- It reminded the person of past bad experiences.

Many people who have experienced trauma feel as if the traumatic experience “wasn’t that big of a deal.” They say, “It’s in the past” or “It doesn’t affect me today.”

### The truth is, unresolved trauma IS affecting you today.

Unresolved trauma can rob you of the joy, freedom, and wholeness you were created to experience. Dr. Tara Brach, author of *True Refuge* describes it this way, “Trauma is when we have encountered an out of control, frightening experience that has disconnected us from all sense of resourcefulness or safety or coping or love.”

Traumatizing events can impact our entire life and being—even when there is no physical harm or damage. The toll for those who have experienced trauma can be high, including a sense of identity, security and dysregulated mood and emotions.

One of the most far-reaching ways that trauma wreaks havoc is in intimate relationships. It’s in the closeness of an intimate relationship where unresolved trauma can trigger dysregulation of our nervous system—sending us outside of our window of tolerance where we find ourselves reacting in a survival mode of fight, flight, or freeze.

## You Have A Window of Tolerance

Neurologically speaking, everyone has a window of tolerance. This window represents an optimal range of experience where things feel “just right.” Within this window life can be stressful or difficult, but you are still able to cope. Within this window we are able to thrive and manage our everyday life.

Neuropsychiatrist Dan Siegel likens the window of tolerance to sailing within a river of well-being. When we are within the window we are able to respond to all that comes our way without getting thrown off course or sinking the sailboat. But here's the problem.

### Stress and traumatic experiences can shrink our window of tolerance.

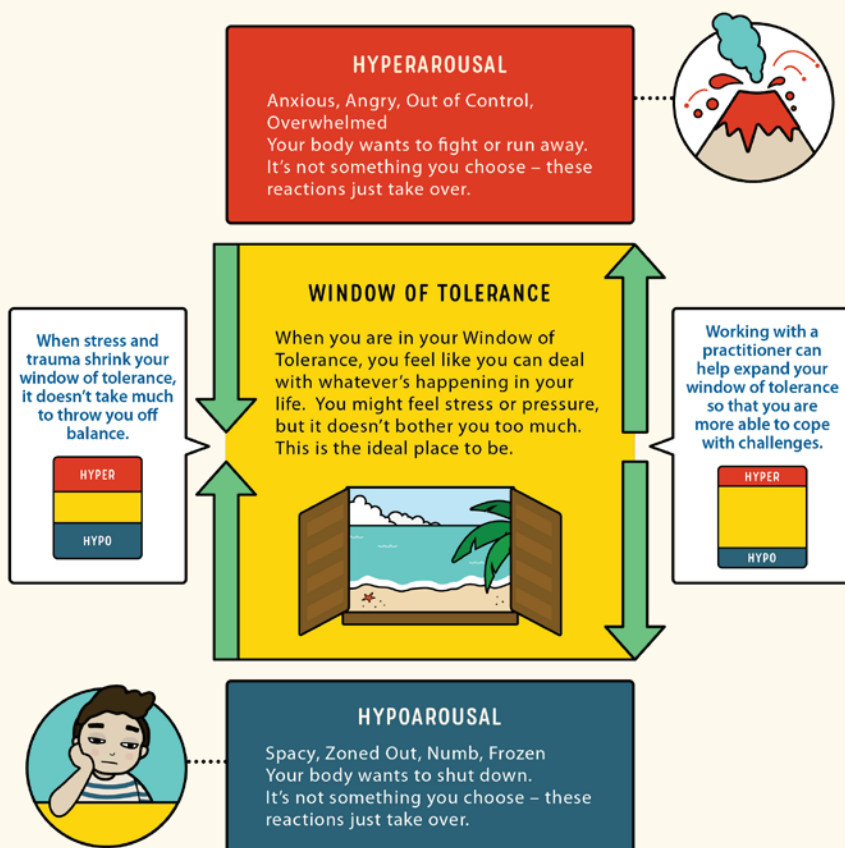
When we are outside our window of tolerance our autonomic nervous system responds by going into one of three survival modes--fight, flight, or freeze. We may feel overwhelmed where our nervous system goes into hyper-arousal (fight or flight response). Or we may shut down where our nervous system goes into hypo-arousal (freeze response).

Everyone's window of tolerance is different. Some people have a wide window of tolerance while others is narrow. Whenever we are not in our window of tolerance there is going to be emotional disconnection and a sense that we are not safe.

When therapists or other practitioners are working with clients, one of the goals is to help clients widen their window of tolerance. But when the window of tolerance is narrow, it's likely that trauma responses will play out in at least five different ways.



# How Trauma Can Affect Your Window Of Tolerance



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Window of Tolerance Diagram used with permission of The National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine

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# 1 Unexplained Patterns of Emotional Escalation and Withdrawal

Have you ever gotten into an argument with your partner, and after the fact thought, “How did things get so tense and so out of control over something so seemingly small?” We all know the phrase, “He pushes my buttons!” But in a relationship where unresolved trauma is a factor, the issue of buttons being pushed is not just a metaphor.

Imagine for a moment that you and your spouse are relaxing on the couch. Suddenly a tiger wanders into the room. What would your response be? You wouldn’t take time to process or think about the event, your autonomic nervous system would take over as a means of protection and preservation. This is how unresolved trauma derails your relationship--by setting off your autonomic nervous system into fight/flight/freeze response. You react to your spouse or partner as if they’re a tiger in your living room.

**Most of us don’t have actual tigers roaming in our home. But in some relationships all it takes is a simple eye roll, heavy sigh, or loud voice to activate the body into fight, flight, or freeze. Before you know it you are in a trauma response.**

Examples of common reactions can include:

- A neutral issue escalates into a conflict--sometimes needing to “win.”
- You feel attacked and go on the defensive.
- Your voice gets louder, your heart races, your muscles tighten, you get angry.
- Your body feels flooded with fear or anger.
- Everything in you wants to run away or withdraw.

## 2 Unexplained Experience of Emotional Disconnection

We often work with couples who report that their partner is not fully present in the relationship. Upon further conversation, that person reports being, “all in,” and “committed,” but unable to act on or sustain their sincere desire to engage. For this person, emotional engagement can be exhausting. Or it may lead to conflict—which in their mind and body feels unsafe.

This numbed sense of emotional presence is described as hypo-arousal. Where hyper-arousal is about being overwhelmed with anxiety, anger, or agitation, hypo-arousal is about being underwhelmed, emotionally frozen, or immobilized. It's the other end of the trauma spectrum. Many times this person has a narrow range of emotions and may appear flat. Partners who experience hypo-arousal are often described as being “all head and no heart” because they seem to be void of feeling and emotion. For this reason they can come across as distant, aloof, uncaring, or uninterested.

Partners often report that their significant other disappears emotionally or “checks out,” and sometimes fails to listen or respond. The person's system goes into overload and shuts down, especially during times of stress. Some people will experience significant tiredness or fatigue; a wave of exhaustion overcomes them and some may even fall asleep during periods of hypo-arousal. This is another way the body protects itself from a potentially dangerous situation.

### You may experience your partner as physically present, but emotionally absent.

This may lead to a chronic sense of loneliness and isolation in your relationship for you and your partner.

Some potential signs of hypo-arousal include:

- Chronic sense of not being able to feel or engage with emotions of others.
- Inability to feel joy, grief, or other normal highs and lows that life may bring.
- Feeling or being described as emotionally numb, frozen, or indifferent.
- Feeling or being described as detached, disconnected, or zoned out.
- Being overcome with fatigue when situations or emotions are high.

### **3 Frequent Experience of Negatively Interpreting Conversations**

Another way unresolved trauma plays out is in communication. Communication between partners can be seen and heard through a filter of past trauma where the individual was actually physically or emotionally unsafe. In the present relationship, both verbal and nonverbal communication ends up being filtered through those past traumatic experiences.

It's common to hear from couples that after experiencing a great time together, they end in a big fight that leaves both parties hurt and confused. When trauma impacts a person, it is like a pair of colored glasses that shape and filter the way a person sees, interprets, and interacts with the world around them. Seemingly harmless behaviors or comments can be misinterpreted and cause a person to react, withdraw, or freeze. Your reactions to another person depend on what you think his or her actions and words mean. Often trauma leaves a person with little ability to see the world as safe, predictable, and reliable.

Some common examples of negative interpretations are:

- Hearing a partners' neutral words as attacking or criticizing despite reassurances.
- Being triggered or reactive over what would normally be considered an innocuous comment or gesture.
- Mis-interpreting the motive and intent of the partner as malicious.
- He says, "When's dinner?" She hears, "What have you done all day that dinner still isn't ready?"
- She says, "Finances are tight this month." He hears, "You don't make enough money to support us."

**In the present relationship, both verbal and non-verbal communication ends up being filtered through those past traumatic experiences.**



## 4 Compulsive or Addictive Behaviors

Unresolved trauma can fuel unhealthy coping behaviors that manifest as addictions. At Restoring the Soul we regularly see couples devastated by various compulsive behaviors where previous attempts at recovery have been unsuccessful. Most often, getting to the root of the addiction is not possible until trauma is addressed.

Some of the most common out of control behaviors can include:

- Abuse or over-use of alcohol, drugs, or other substances, including food.
- Out of control behavior with pornography or other sexual behaviors.
- Impulsive shopping, spending, gambling, or gaming.
- Compulsive lying and deception – even about small things.
- Over-working or being “too busy,” often with an inability to rest or be still.

## 5 Unexplained Difficulty With Sexual Intimacy

One of the most common places unaddressed trauma plays out is in the bedroom. And though it's often assumed that women carry trauma into their sexual relationship, men are affected by trauma as well—but it can sometimes be more difficult to see. There are many reasons the issues below may be present – unaddressed medical issues, relational conflict, life stressors, etc. Once these have been ruled out, and issues persist, then trauma may be an underlying factor.

The key is unexplained difficulty:

- Inability to feel emotionally connected during sex.
- Hyper-sexuality that substitutes for emotional intimacy.
- A partner who feels “used,” objectified, or consumed.
- A low sex drive or lack of interest in sex.
- Being angry or resentful towards the opposite sex.

The ability to be truly present and available for another person during sex requires not only physical intimacy, but emotional vulnerability. Trauma can rob us of our sense of safety and security, so it's no wonder real sexual intimacy eludes so many of us. An intimate relationship requires a sense of emotional and physical safety in order to thrive.

Most often, getting to the root of the addiction is not possible until trauma is addressed.

## What To Do If Unresolved Trauma Is The Culprit In Your Relationship

As trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk writes, *"Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives."*

Charise and Tony addressed unresolved trauma when they participated in a Restoring the Soul two-week couples intensive. This allowed their individual trauma issues to be addressed alongside the marital issues. As underlying trauma issues were given attention, they were finally able to experience the deep emotional connection they longed for.

Here are five essential steps to addressing unresolved trauma:

- Get an accurate assessment and diagnosis from a licensed traumainformed therapist. Trauma is often undetected and many counselors are not trained or experienced in treating trauma. Making sure a therapist is trauma-informed indicates an understanding of trauma symptoms and their neurobiological impact.
- Learn practices and skills to increase your window of tolerance. A competent therapist will make this a priority. There are many good resources available which offer skills such as breathing and grounding exercises, resource tapping, mindfulness, and others.
- Take a break from weekly couples counseling until unresolved individual trauma issues are addressed. Attempting couples counseling without addressing unresolved trauma can actually increase conflict and put undue stress on the relationship.
- Learn about trauma and the power of new treatments including EMDR, Somatic/Body Therapies, Emotional Freedom Technique, and more.
- Consider attending a one or two-week Intensive Counseling Program at Restoring the Soul in Denver, Colorado.

**Learn More About Our  
Counseling Intensives**

## Additional Resources

[Healing Trauma Through EMDR Therapy](#), Restoring the Soul Podcast with Barb Maiberger

Becoming Whole, Restoring the Soul Podcast with Trauma-Informed Therapist Aundi Kolber [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#)

*The Body Keeps The Score*, Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D.

*Waking The Tiger*, Peter Levine

*Tapping In*, Laurel Parnell

*Healing The Wounded Heart*, Dan Allender, Ph.D.

[EMDR Essentials](#), Restoring the Soul Podcast with Michael John Cusick and EMDR Expert, Barb Maiberger

Try Softer, Restoring the Soul Podcast with Trauma-Informed Therapist Aundi Kolber [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#)

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