

The following tools and excerpt are from the book Trauma Stewardship, by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk. We offer them as a window into looking at where trauma and violence impact our lives and our organizing, both where we experience it directly and where we are exposed to the effects of trauma/violence on people around us.

Trauma impacts us on many intertwined levels: mentally, physically, psychologically, spiritually, societally. "Trauma stewardship" is a concept that encompasses how, as people working for justice, we engage with the amount of pain and traumatic responses that we hold collectively in our communities and society. There are different terms that refer to the effects of someone else's trauma upon you: secondary trauma, secondary traumatic stress disorder, compassion fatigue or provider fatigue, empathic strain.

"Trauma stewardship refers to the entire conversation about how we come to do this work, how we are impacted by our work, and how we subsequently make sense of and learn from our experiences... By talking about trauma in terms of stewardship, we remember that we are being entrusted with peoples' stories and their very lives. We understand that this is an incredible honor as well as a tremendous responsibility. We know that as good stewards, we get to create a space for and honor others' hardship and suffering while not assuming their pain as our own. We get to care for them to the best of our ability while not co-opting their paths as our paths. We are required to develop and maintain a long-term strategy for ourselves such that we can remain whole and helpful to others even amidst their greatest challenges. To participate in trauma stewardship is to continuously remember the privilege and the sacredness of being called to help another sentient being; it means maintaining our highest ethics, integrity, and responsibility every step of the way."

We highly recommend checking out this book if you haven't, or looking at some other resources to learn more about how humans experience, respond to, and can heal from trauma. To be our strongest, most whole selves, to move through the world in the way we want to and create the kind of deep change we want, we have to be interested in healing ourselves and transforming pain instead of being caught in its cycle.

"Taking care of ourselves while taking care of others allows us to contribute to our societies with such impact that we will leave a legacy informed by our deepest wisdom and greatest gifts instead of burdened with our struggles and despair."

all quotes from Trauma Stewardship.

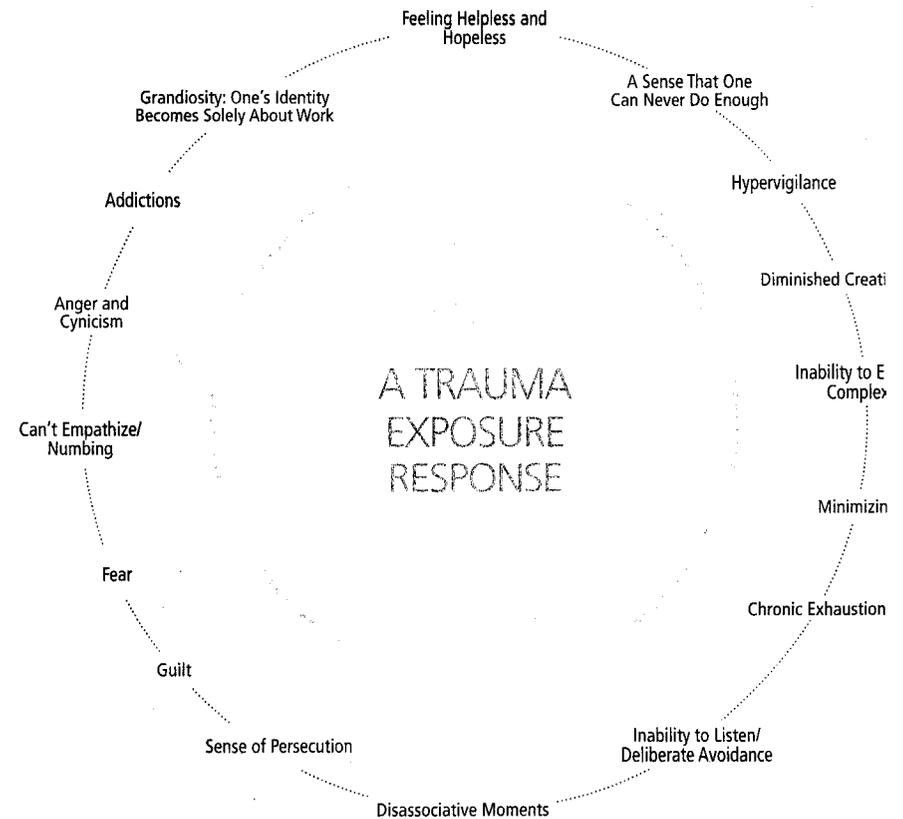
Other resources include: Waking the Tiger, by Peter Levine  
Healing From Trauma, Jasmin Lee Cori

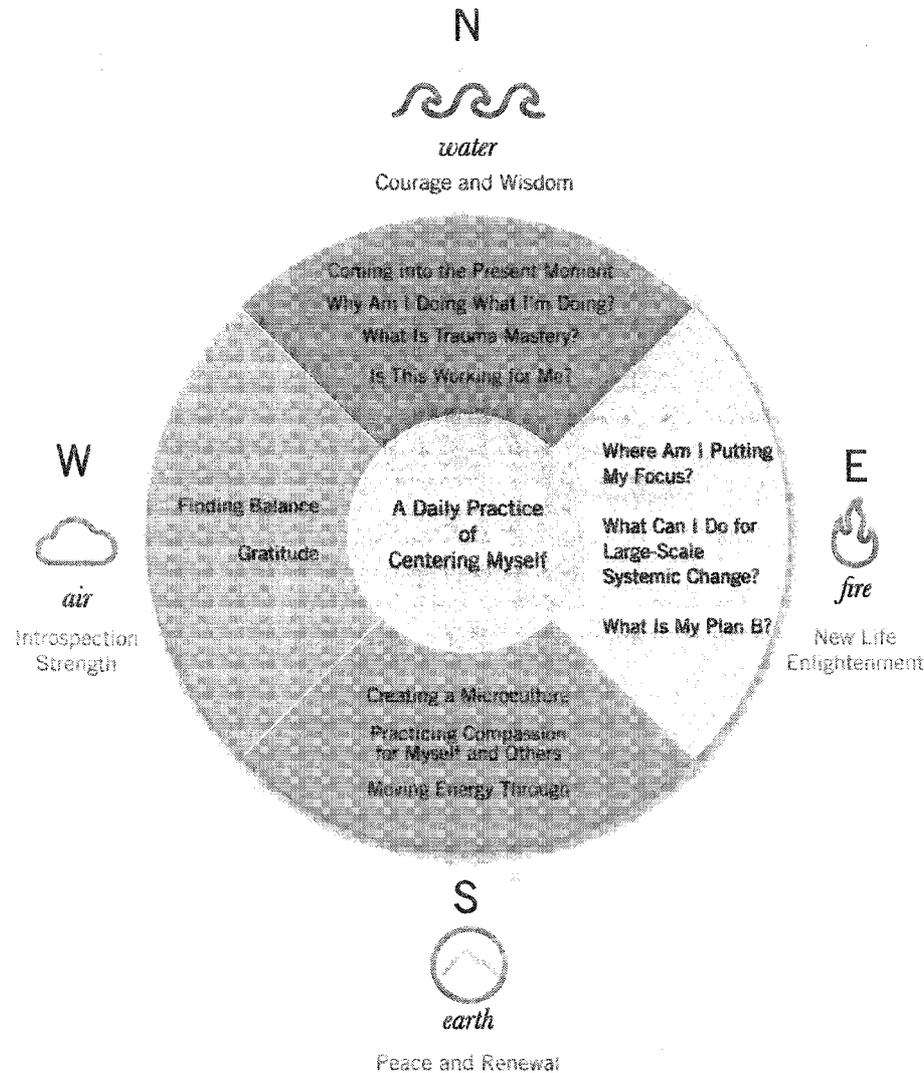
physically respond. Consequently, most of us have become separated from our natural, instinctual selves — in particular, the part of us that can proudly, not disparagingly, be called animal...The fundamental challenges we face today have come about relatively quickly, but our nervous systems have been much slower to change. It is no coincidence that people who are more in touch with their natural selves tend to fare better when it comes to trauma.”

It is critical to remember that while aspects of our trauma exposure response may have served us in some capacity or may continue to serve us in some capacity, and may be socially and institutionally supported, we are exploring them from the standpoint of “How is this working for my deepest, most honest self? How is this really working for those I’m serving? How is this sustainable? What is a more functional way?”

When I was a social worker in the trauma center at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, the level one trauma center for the Pacific Northwest, I marveled at how some of the doctors could distance themselves from their feelings. When someone died, a doctor and a social worker went into a small room called “the quiet room” and the doctor conveyed the news to the patient’s loved ones. He or she would answer any questions and then leave, and the social worker would remain with the family. I remember feeling like I was in an altered reality watching the distant look in the doctors’ eyes, hearing their hollow tone of voice, and seeing the matter-of-fact way they would talk with families. While it was deeply unsettling to me, I fully understood that if I had to choose between that doctor being a person who could possibly help save the life of someone I loved or that doctor being a compassionate, active listener, I’d choose the former. I knew that for the doctors and nurses to operate within the conditions at hand, trying desperately to help critically injured patients, they had to develop some immediate way of coping. And yet it was evident that this kind of compartmentalizing and numbing was not wholly sustainable, and that there was a personal and professional cost, both to them and to those around them.

Of course, there are many ways that people may respond to trauma exposure which are not included in this book, but I have included the most common experiences in the following sections.





The *five* Directions

on the directions, whether you are commuting to or from work, about your business, or lying in your bed at night, is one you create a daily mindfulness practice. And of course, you can use the Directions as inspiration for rituals of your own!

By moving among these directions, elements, and steps, you are able to create, and most importantly, maintain, a daily practice which we become centered. When we are centered, we are in the direction. There will be countless times in our lives and our lives when the water turns into a tidal wave, the fire into an inferno, the earth into quicksand, and the air into a tornado. We may feel overwhelmed, bombarded, off our game, and at a loss, sometimes several times each day. Attuning ourselves to the Five Directions is one way to regain calm — to once again remember who we are, where we are headed, and what we need. Being centered allows us to create a constant oasis of wisdom, perspective, and integrity, regardless of how out of control everything and everyone around us seems. As we continue our personal practice, we can approach our circumstances proactively rather than reactively. With sustained practice, we can maintain our inner resources we need to care for ourselves and care for others. Ability is the foundation of trauma stewardship.

In the chapters ahead, I will supply various suggestions for building your practice. I offer the Five Directions to those who seek guidance as they tread a new path. Should you be someone who prefers to keep your mind free as you explore, then simply go on with confidence that your daily practice will evolve in its own unique way.

## Moving Energy Through

"I haven't breathed since last week."

Community clinic executive director during a crisis period

In traditional Chinese medicine, there is a belief that dis-ease in one's being comes in part from stagnant energy. When we talk about energy we are talking about your life force, your vitality, what it is that makes you you, your very essence. It's what gets you up in the morning, what you feel when someone walks into the room, the sensations you recall when you think about someone who has died. An important part of well-being in this tradition is keeping the energy moving and not letting stagnation accumulate anywhere. I think this is such an invaluable practice for those of us interacting with suffering: being able to exist with awareness amid the radiating waves of pain, not absorbing and accumulating them, just allowing them to ripple out and away.

Peter Levine invites us to learn from animals in the wild in gaining insight into why, as humans, we are so often traumatized, while animals so rarely are. Through his decades of study, he found that humans and animals share the flight, fight, or immobility (freezing) responses summoned by the reptilian parts of our brains. When we perceive a threat, a great deal of energy is summoned. When we are able to fight or flee, that energy is naturally discharged — and, as we see with animals in the wild, it is possible to return to life as it was before the threat. If we feel threatened and are unable to fight or flee, our organism instinctively constricts (or freezes) in a last-ditch effort at self-preservation. Again, when an animal in the wild survives danger through immobility, it will unfreeze itself, literally shake off the accumulated energy, and continue to graze or care for its young — in other words, to generally go about its business. As Levine found, however, this release is not so easy for humans. When we move into the constricted freezing response, a tremendous amount of energy becomes bound up in and begins to overwhelm our nervous system. If our reptilian brain impulses were allowed to run their course, we would discharge this expanse of highly charged energy once the threat

passed. Instead, however, our highly evolved neocortex (rational brain) often gets in the way. The fear and desire for control that arise in the neocortex can be so powerful that they interrupt the restorative impulses that would allow for a necessary form of discharge. As humans, then, we are stranded partway through the same nervous system cycle that keeps animals well and thriving. In us, undischarged residual energy becomes the seed for deep-rooted trauma with myriad symptoms (see Chapter Four). Our symptoms are often the organism's way of containing this undischarged energy. As Levine sums it up in *Waking the Tiger*, "The neocortex is not powerful enough to override the instinctual defense response to threat and danger — the fight, flee, or freeze response. In this respect we humans are still inextricably bound to our animal heritage. Animals, however, do not have a highly evolved neocortex to interfere with the natural return to normal functioning through some form of discharge. In humans, trauma occurs as a result of the initiation of an instinctual cycle that is not allowed to finish."

Somatic experiencing begins the process of melting this frozen energy in our nervous system and allowing our nervous system to become, once again, self-regulating and resilient. Learning to work with our internal energies is one of the first steps in supporting our body's innate capacity to heal. Practitioners of somatic experiencing believe that "the core of traumatic reaction is ultimately physiological, and it is at this level that healing begins." Gently exploring ways to keep our internal energy flowing and, when it is blocked, to unblock it will create the foundation we need for long-term wellness.

"It's like I feel all this toxicity build up inside of me and if I don't go surfing or go biking or go for a run I can't function any more."

Mark Thanassi, Attending physician, emergency medicine

In Jewish tradition there is the practice of sitting shiva when someone dies. One of the guidelines for sitting shiva is that the visitors are not allowed to talk with or touch the mourners until they are explicitly invited to do so. One reason for this is a respect for the

we say, or how we touch — it's about being present in a way that tells those who are suffering that they are not and never will be alone. Because we are all inherently connected, the witnesses will share some of the burden of what the mourners are experiencing — even if they do no other thing.

If we are to remain physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy, however, sharing the pain cannot translate into soaking it all up. It must be kept moving. If all the struggle and hardship we witness accumulates and takes root, it will grow so that any light we have within us is entirely obscured. Uprooting this accumulated anguish is much, much harder than preventing it from taking root in the first place. Jack Kornfield says, “What has been entrusted to us, and what do we do with it? It's simple. When we possess [others' sufferings] in an unhealthy way, we worry, we're caught, and we're neither at peace nor free. Since it all changes, it's guaranteed that it's going to change, we need to discover a capacity to let go, a graciousness of heart.”

For many of us, this requires some radical reframing. You may be someone who was raised to believe that action = movement = growth = survival, and so when you think of stillness you may come up with the equation: stillness = surrender = powerlessness = death. We are talking, then, about the notion of moving energy not necessarily through stillness per se, but through a mindful and disciplined approach of de-toxing, cleansing, and putting our burdens down. Some can do this using rapid actions such as running, while others move toward the equation of stillness = awareness = connection = action = life. Those people may practice focused breathing, meditating, walking, gardening, chanting, and so on. As Thich Nhat Hanh said to a student who asked just how much she needed to slow down, “You never see us monks running. We walk slowly. It's too hard to be present when you're moving quickly.”

So we talk about moving energy through as a way of describing how to keep ourselves at our optimal level. One way to move energy through is by conscious breathing. It may come as a surprise that attention to breathing is central to keeping ourselves in a state of balance, yet every ancient tradition has as a critical element mindful and deliberate breathing. Native Americans have held Sun Dancing

run as a central tenet to their well-being; East Indian traditions have practiced yoga since the beginning of time, and, more recently, held focused-laughter gatherings. Meditative traditions all over the world developed techniques that sharpen the mind's awareness and cultivate insight using one's own breath as the primary guide. Breathing is the one regular, life-sustaining process we can always observe within ourselves. It is evidence of the present moment rising and passing away. It is a constant reminder that everything, including our own lives, is subject to a universal law, the law of impermanence. This perspective can free us to realize the myriad choices we have to live harmoniously, with deeper awareness, in this life.

“The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud... Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told.”

Judith Herman, author of *Trauma and Recovery* and associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School

When I was in New Orleans facilitating trauma stewardship workshops after Hurricane Katrina, I had the privilege of working with the People's Hurricane Relief Fund. There were two women who stood out as having a unique radiance among so many who had been left with a pained, hollow look in their eyes. Both Kimberley Richards and Kanika Taylor-Murphy are community organizers, activists, and educators. Neither were in New Orleans when the storm hit land and the levees broke. Both survived the trauma as first responders. One lost everything but her brick house, itself, in Picayune, Mississippi. Both continued to live with ample subsequent trauma exposure as they worked with the People's Hurricane Relief Fund, the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, and other family, friends, and organizations in an effort to rebuild New Orleans. I had the opportunity to inquire what they'd done that had been helpful to care for themselves. Kimberley Richards said, “For a month after the storm hit, I wasn't doing anything to take care of myself.

And then I started getting sick, like in my head. Since then I have walked every morning for an hour or two. I'm joined by about seven other women now, and we walk through the neighborhoods and I breathe. It's hard because my oppression tells me if I have that time I should be helping other people. My oppression tells me that if I'm up that early I should be writing a grant. But I keep doing it, I keep walking." Kanika Taylor-Murphy said that practicing Qigong and walking with Kimberley and their comrades were what allowed her to keep on keeping on.

Billie Lawson has spent her career in frontline trauma work as well as immersed in trauma debriefings throughout the state of Washington. She creates cues throughout her day simply to remind herself to breathe deeply. Each time her phone rings at work, she takes a full inhale and exhale before she picks up the receiver. It's an exercise she gets to perform frequently!

Other ways of moving energy through include working out, writing, singing, chanting, dancing, martial arts, walking, and laughing, just as long as these activities are done with mindfulness.