

Relationships Under Fire: Marriage, Friendship and Trauma



Trauma in Relationships

Trauma does not only wound the individual — it impacts every relationship connected to that person. Healing happens best when people learn how to move from survival mode into safe, connected relationships again.

Understanding Trauma

- Trauma affects:
 - The nervous system
 - Emotional regulation
 - Trust
 - Communication
 - Attachment
 - Conflict response

What It Looks Like

- **Fight**
 - Anger
 - Irritability
 - Control
 - Defensiveness
- **Flight**
 - Overworking
 - Staying busy
 - Avoidance
 - Escaping emotionally
- **Freeze**
 - Emotional numbness
 - Shutdown
 - Detachment
 - Isolation
- **Fawn**
 - People pleasing
 - Fear of conflict
 - Losing personal boundaries
- “What looks like rejection is often protection.”
 - Many trauma survivors:
 - Avoid vulnerability
 - Fear being misunderstood
 - Anticipate disappointment
 - Struggle to feel emotionally safe

Common Marriage Struggles

- Emotional distance
- Increased conflict
- Irritability
- Difficulty expressing emotions
- Lack of intimacy
- Trust issues
- Communication breakdowns
- Feeling emotionally alone
- “The issue is often not lack of love — but lack of safety.”

The Cycle

- Discussion: The Pursuer & Withdrawer Cycle
- One spouse:
 - Wants connection
 - Wants to talk
 - Pushes for reassurance
- The other:
 - Shuts down
 - Avoids conflict
 - Pulls away
- This creates:
 - More pursuit
 - More withdrawal
 - More frustration

The Tools

- Tool 1: Slow the Conversation
 - Instead of:
 - “You never listen.”
 - Try:
 - “I don’t feel heard right now.”
- Tool 2: Learn Trigger Awareness
 - Ask:
 - What situations escalate me?
 - What tone affects me?
 - What patterns make me shut down?
- Tool 3: Build Predictability
 - Trauma healing loves consistency:
 - Follow through
 - Clear communication
 - Reliability
 - Honesty

Friendship and Isolation

- **Why Trauma Creates Isolation**
- **Many people:**
 - **Stop reaching out**
 - **Feel misunderstood**
 - **Fear burdening others**
 - **Lose trust in people**
 - **Feel emotionally exhausted**

The Danger

- **The Danger of Isolation**
- **Isolation often increases:**
 - **Depression**
 - **Anxiety**
 - **Shame**
 - **Addiction struggles**
 - **Hopelessness**
- **Common Lies Trauma Tells**
 - **“No one understands.”**
 - **“I’m too broken.”**
 - **“People are better off without me.”**
 - **“I can handle this alone.”**

The Tools

- **Healthy Friendship Principles**
- **Good friends:**
 - **Listen without fixing**
 - **Stay consistent**
 - **Avoid minimizing pain**
 - **Show up repeatedly**
 - **Create safety**
- **Practical Friendship Challenge**
 - **Reach out to one trusted person this week**
 - **Have one honest conversation**
 - **Rebuild small connection points**

Trust and Triggers

- **Trust After Trauma**
- **Trauma often teaches:**
 - **“People are unsafe.”**
 - **“Vulnerability is dangerous.”**
 - **“I must stay guarded.”**
- **Emotional safety grows through:**
 - **Consistency**
 - **Non-defensive listening**
 - **Calm presence**
 - **Honesty**
 - **Boundaries**
 - **Respect**

Case Study

- Mike returned home from deployment eight months ago. Since coming home, his wife Sarah notices he rarely talks after work. He sits in the garage for long periods before coming inside. When Sarah asks what is wrong, he responds with:
 - “Nothing.”
 - “I’m just tired.”
 - “I don’t want to talk about it.”
- Sarah feels lonely and rejected.
- Mike feels overwhelmed and pressured whenever she pushes for conversation.
- One night Sarah says:
 - “It feels like you don’t even want to be part of this family anymore.”
- Mike immediately becomes defensive and angry.
- Discussion Questions
 - What trauma responses do you notice?
 - What emotions might Sarah be experiencing?
 - What emotions might Mike be experiencing beneath the anger?
 - How could both people unintentionally escalate the cycle?
 - What would emotional safety look like here?

Case Study

- James used to be deeply connected with a group of close friends. After a traumatic incident at work, he slowly stopped answering texts, declined invitations, and isolated himself.
- Months later, one friend finally asks:
 - “Why have you disappeared?”
- James shrugs and says:
 - “I’m fine. Just busy.”
- In reality:
 - He feels emotionally exhausted
 - He fears people will not understand
 - He does not want to feel weak
 - He feels disconnected from who he used to be
- Discussion Questions
 - Why do trauma survivors often isolate?
 - What fears may exist underneath “I’m fine”?
 - What responses from friends help?
 - What responses make isolation worse?