



THE ART OF HOLDING SPACE WITHOUT FIXING

*A soft guide for loving
someone with trauma*

by Larissa Maddy

Welcome

If you're reading this, you may love someone who has been through something deeply painful.

Learning about a loved one's trauma can stir many emotions. You might feel grief for what they lost, anger toward those who caused harm, shock, confusion, helplessness, or a deep wish to protect. All of these responses are natural. They don't mean you're doing something wrong. They mean you care.

Supporting someone with trauma can be heavy, not only because of what they're carrying, but because of what it awakens in you. This resource is here to acknowledge your experience too.

My intention in creating this guide comes from the perspective of someone who has lived through trauma. I know how much the presence of a loved one can mean, even when it isn't always visible, even when the person you're supporting is still in survival mode. Your steadiness, patience, and care matter more than you might realize. Sometimes, they are felt only later, when the nervous system begins to soften again.

This guide is an invitation to support without losing yourself, to understand what may be happening beneath the surface, and to remember that your presence alone can make a deeper impact than you think.

A handwritten signature in a fluid, cursive script. The signature reads "Larissa Maddy" with a long, sweeping line for the "s" and "a".

larissamaddy.com

info@larissamaddy.com

A gentle understanding of trauma

Trauma isn't defined only by what happened. It's shaped by how the body had to adapt in order to survive. When someone has experienced trauma, their nervous system may remain alert long after the danger has passed.

This can show up as:

- withdrawal or shutdown
- heightened emotions or irritability
- difficulty trusting or relaxing
- sudden reactions that seem disproportionate
- a need for control, distance, or predictability

These responses are not personal attacks. They are protective strategies. The body remembers what the mind tries to move past.

*This guide is not a substitute for therapy, but a supportive resource for understanding and presence.

When trauma shows up in relationships

Trauma doesn't stay contained in the past.

It lives in the nervous system, and the nervous system is deeply relational. When someone has experienced trauma, their body may have learned that closeness, unpredictability, or intensity can equal danger.

Even in loving, safe relationships, the nervous system doesn't always update automatically.



Survival responses in connection

Under stress or emotional intensity, the nervous system can shift into survival modes:

- Fight: defensiveness, anger, irritability
- Flight: withdrawal, avoidance, emotional distance
- Freeze: shutdown, numbness, dissociation
- Fawn: people-pleasing, over-adapting, loss of boundaries

These responses once helped the person survive. In relationships, they can appear confusing or inconsistent. What may look like rejection or indifference is often a body trying to protect itself.

Why it can feel so personal

Trauma responses often show up in close relationships, not because love is absent, but because closeness matters. Connection can trigger both longing and fear at the same time. This can create cycles of reaching and pulling away, leaving both people feeling misunderstood. Understanding this helps shift the story from “something is wrong with us” to “a nervous system is under strain.”



What helps the nervous system soften

Healing happens through felt safety, not pressure.

Safety is built through:

- predictable, calm presence
- respect for boundaries
- low-pressure connection
- being met without demand

Over time, the nervous system can learn something new: Connection does not have to be dangerous.

A compassionate reframe

Trauma responses are not a lack of love.

They are not personal failures.

They are signs of a body that learned to survive, and is still learning that safety can exist here, too.



What truly supports healing

When trauma is present, healing doesn't come from explanations or solutions. What supports healing most is safety.

This can look like:

- staying calm during emotional moments
- listening without trying to change the experience
- respecting boundaries, even when they're hard to understand
- allowing space without withdrawing love



You don't need to have the right words. Your regulated presence is already doing a lot. Often, what helps most is being someone who doesn't demand clarity or progress.



What can unintentionally overwhelm



Even with the best intentions, some responses can increase stress for someone with trauma.

This may include:

- pushing for conversations before they feel ready
- offering advice too quickly
- trying to “logic” emotions away
- taking reactions personally

This doesn't make you wrong or uncaring.
It simply means the nervous system is leading, not reason.
When in doubt, slowing down is usually supportive.



Resourcing yourself

When someone you love is activated, the moment before you respond matters. This short pause is about staying grounded so you don't place pressure, expectations, or urgency on the other person.

1

Before engaging, gently orient inward. Feel your feet or seat. Notice where your body is supported. Take one slow breath. This reminds your system you are safe.

2

Silently name this to yourself: This person is hurting. This is not about me. I don't need to fix this. This reframes the moment from reaction to understanding.

3

Let go of expectations. No need for resolution. Your role is to meet them where they are. Presence without agenda creates the most safety.

Your nervous system sets the tone.
Regulation is felt, not explained.

You are allowed to care deeply and take care of yourself.
Being supportive does not mean abandoning your own needs.

Simple practices for co-regulation

Co-regulation happens through presence, not effort and is a nourishing way to support both yourself and the one you love. Sometimes, silence, when it's calm and attuned, can be deeply reassuring and more supportive than words could ever be.



SLOW YOUR BREATHING

Start to notice your breath and gently extend your inhales and exhales. No force, just allowing your breath to slow down naturally. Even a few minutes can do wonders.

SOFTEN YOUR SHOULDERS

Take a deep breath in, and as you exhale, imagine your shoulders dropping down heavy. Let the weight they carry fall off of you.

LOWER YOUR VOICE

As your breath slows, your voice naturally lowers and softens. This signals that you are grounded, and helps the other person feel safe.

Daily Self-Care Checklist

Loving someone with trauma can draw your attention outward. This page is a reminder to come back to yourself as a form of care. Choose one or two that feel accessible to you today.

Body

- Place both feet on the ground and notice their contact
- Take three slow breaths without changing their rhythm
- Stretch, sway, or move your body for a few minutes
- Drink a glass of water and feel it move through you

Nervous system

- Step outside and notice something neutral or pleasant
- Reduce stimulation (lower lights, sound, screen time)
- Name five things you can see around you
- Place a hand on your chest or belly for comfort



Boundaries

- Check in: What is mine to hold, and what isn't?
- Allow yourself to pause before responding
- Say no to one small thing that feels draining
- Remember: support does not require self-abandonment



Emotional care

- Acknowledge how you are feeling today
- Let emotions move without fixing them
- Write one sentence about what you need
- Offer yourself the same kindness you give others

Grounding yourself is not selfish.

It creates safety for you and for those you love.

Small, consistent moments of care are often more powerful than big gestures.



Gentle reminders

You are not responsible for
someone else's healing.
You cannot do this perfectly.
And you don't need to.
Love and patience matter.
So do limits and rest.

Trauma healing takes time.
Connection is not linear.
Your presence,
when grounded and kind,
already makes a difference.



Your support matters.

Thank you...

for being someone who wants to love with awareness and care.

If you ever feel overwhelmed or unsure, coming back into your own body is a powerful first step.

I offer trauma-informed, body-based 1:1 guidance for individuals and for those supporting loved ones, rooted in safety, consent, and slowness.



Contact:

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