

Why Safety Has to Be Learned More Than Once

A person with developmental or complex trauma may fully understand, in a thoughtful and rational way, that the present is safer than the past. At the same time, the nervous system may still respond from older threat learning. This does not mean the person is irrational or permanently damaged. It reflects how repeated adversity shaped survival predictions over time.

Why this happens



Chronic abuse and emotional neglect can shape learned predictions about danger, connection, vulnerability, and safety.



These patterns are adaptations to repeated experience, not evidence of a “damaged brain.”



When threat or neglect happens again and again, the body learns what to expect.

Knowing is not the same as predicting



Explicit knowledge (“I know I’m safe”) and older associative or threat learning are not identical systems.



A person can intellectually know the present is safe while the nervous system still predicts an old outcome such as rejection, harm, engulfment, abandonment, or shame.



This helps explain why reactions can feel fast, bodily, and surprising.

How change usually happens



Trauma recovery usually involves new learning more than simply erasing old learning.



Repeated experiences of safety, agency, choice, successful boundaries, emotional regulation, and relational repair gradually build stronger alternative predictions.



Present-oriented and body-based trauma work can gently pair activation or bodily sensations with new information such as: “I am here now.” “I have choices.” “I can orient.” “I can move.” “I can stop.” “I can ask for help.”



Repetition helps these newer responses become more accessible.

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Healing is nonlinear and new learning takes repetition.

Why healing is nonlinear



Old learning can be retrieved during stress even after substantial progress.



A familiar reaction returning does not mean the person is back at the beginning.



It often means the older network was activated, while newer learning is still available and can be strengthened again.

A note on memory updating



Research on memory reconsolidation suggests that retrieved memories can sometimes become modifiable when present experience differs from what the nervous system predicted. This may create opportunities for updating old learning.



However, not every somatic or trauma-focused intervention produces reconsolidation. Change depends on timing, context, and a meaningful mismatch between expectation and current experience.



Contemporary PTSD and interoception research suggests that present-day orienting, body awareness, and choice can help the nervous system link sensation with updated information, supporting new learning over time.

Selected science



- Sheridan & McLaughlin (2014)
- McLaughlin, Weissman, & Bitrán (2019)
- Teicher & Samson (2016)
- Craske et al. (2014)
- Schwabe, Nader, & Pruessner (2014)
- Contemporary PTSD and interoception research

Healing is not teaching the nervous system that the past did not happen. It is repeatedly giving it enough present-day evidence to learn that the past is not happening now.