

SESSION 4: AWAKING TO A NEW REALITY

How do you recover from the emotional effects of trauma and find contentment in life again?



INTRODUCTIONS

In the last session we focused on grieving losses and making deliberate steps toward regaining what was lost.

- ***Who wants to share what they learned from the “Rediscovering What Was Lost” handout? What did you add to your list? Were there any surprises?***
- ***Who wants to share what they learned from the “Grieving What Was Lost” handout? How did you feel as you were writing your letter or letters?***

BEHIND THE SCENES

Today we are going to talk about the initial days and months after a traumatic event and how human minds and bodies normally responds to trauma. On October 15, 1979 Brooks and Leslie had loving parents, a secure home, and bright hopes for their future. On October 16, 1979, Brooks and Leslie were orphans, seriously injured, and about to enter a long, painful journey of criminal trials and personal recovery. In the days and months after the incident, Brooks describes his life as a bad dream he kept waiting to wake up from. It didn't seem possible. It didn't seem real. People came to his hospital room and burst into tears. Brooks found himself comforting them rather than being comforted. He lived in a state of emotional numbness and disconnect from the world around him for several months and even years.

MOVIE CLIP – *Play Session 4: Awakening to a New Reality*

Let's look at what Brooks remembers of the days after the crime. As you watch, try to think about what you remember from the hours and days after your traumatic experience.

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

[First, write responses to the questions below (*think*), then share your responses with a partner (*pair*), then discuss the questions as a group (*share*):

- 1) What did you observe in Brooks when he went to his parents' gravesite and then back to his family's house? What did he say? What did he do? What do you think he was feeling? How did he express his grief?
- 2) What did you observe in Leslie as she stood by her parents' gravesite? What did she say? What did she do? What do you think she was feeling? How did she express grief?
- 3) When you think back on your own life, describe what you remember of the hours and days after your traumatic experience. What did you do? What did you say? What were you feeling?

One person read aloud, then discuss as a group: **What can you relate to?**

Can you relate to a sense of emotional numbness or disconnect after the crime?



FROM BROOKS: *I didn't realize how numb I was until I started to feel again. I remember when [my ex-girlfriend from before the crime] came to visit me about two years after my parents died. I was walking past a window and overheard her friend ask, "Do you think you and Brooks will ever get back together?" And she said, "No, I don't think so." It was like a shot; I felt so hurt, like I'd literally been kicked in the stomach. Then I remember walking a few steps more and thinking on the one hand "Oh, my gosh, I can't believe that." I was so sad, but at the same time, I thought, "Wow, I felt something," realizing that was the first time in two and half years that I'd really emotionally felt anything, and I was kind of being happy at the same time that I was actually feeling something again.*

I remember at that time, I must have been going through a lot of realizations, or sort of waking up. I was talking to a friend on the phone, and I described what I was feeling—it was like looking out and seeing everything as very cold. The trees were barren, and the sky was gray. I could see that the wind was blowing, but I didn't feel the wind or the cold. I didn't feel anything. Then as time went on, it was like I was backing away and realizing that the whole time I was looking out a window. There was a reason why I was disconnected from all that—because I was inside and there was a window. Then I realized I shouldn't be feeling what's out there, and instead I should be able to feel what is in here, inside with the heater going—but not really being able to connect with either one. But at least I was starting to identify what I should be able to connect to and what I shouldn't be able to.

It was really strange. I remember if someone asked me if I liked chocolate or vanilla ice cream, it was like I didn't have any taste buds. I would think, "I really don't know." The process I used to go through was thinking: "I used to like chocolate ice cream, and vanilla is kind of a plain flavor, so I guess I like chocolate." But I didn't really have a sense of taste to know for sure.

It was about being disconnected physically, emotionally, psychologically from everything and everybody.

SELF-REFLECTION – HANDOUT 4.1

Brooks shared examples of how he felt after the traumatic event and how numbness and disconnectedness dominated his life. Can you relate to this feeling? Take a few minutes to think about how shock and emotional numbing may have played a role in your life since the incident. (*Pass out Handout 4.1*)

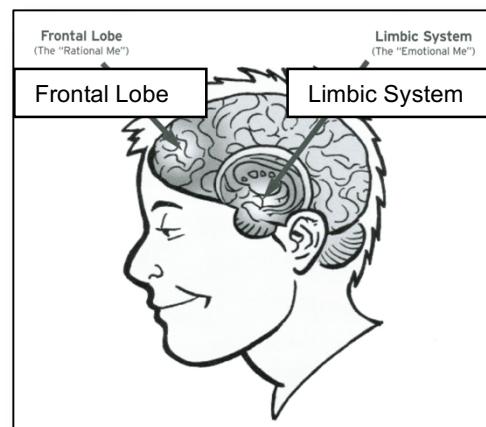
Use this handout to reflect on how emotional numbness and disconnectedness may have affected your life. We will discuss this handout as a group in a few minutes. Discuss key questions from *Handout 4.1: Self-Reflection – How has numbness affected your life?*

- Does anyone want to share his/her answer to #1: **“Can you relate to the sensation of feeling numb? If yes, how would you describe this feeling?”**
- Who wants to share his/her response to question #3: **“Think of a moment since the traumatic event when you felt less numb and more alive in the moment. Describe the moment. Why do you think you felt less numb?”**
- Who wants to share his/her response to question #5: **“What have you found in your life that helps you feel less numb and more alive?”**
- What about question #6: **“What makes you feel more numb?”**

CLASS DISCUSSION

Human brains are designed to perceive, understand, and store new information in an organized manner. Our brains gather information through our five senses—sight, sound, smell, feel, and taste. In trauma, these senses are severely overwhelmed—sights seem unbelievable, sounds and smells magnify, and pain pierces. Terrified, your body and brain are flooded with adrenaline, your heart beats fiercely, and your mind struggles desperately to survive. At some point, it is too much. The circuits blow. Normal brain functioning lessens and survival mode kicks in. In survival mode, your limbic system (the emotional center of your brain) takes over and the frontal lobe (the rational part of your brain) goes numb. Instead of feeling the intense fear, helplessness, and threat of the situation, the brain slips into a sense of numbness and disconnect from the moment. Psychologist and trauma expert, Judith Herman³, writes: *“This altered state of consciousness might be regarded as one of nature’s small mercies, a protection against unbearable pain”* (p. 43). Most trauma survivors describe similar sensations as their brains moved from high alert to disconnectedness and emotional numbness. Some felt like it was just a dream that they couldn’t wake up from. Some remember it all in slow motion. Others felt like the event wasn’t actually happening to them, as if they were outside their own body and standing beside the situation. For some, this sense of disconnect and numbness only lasts days; for others it can be months or years.

While this natural defense system is helpful in the moment of trauma, it ultimately delays the necessary stages of healthy recovery. The memory



of the trauma is pushed below normal consciousness—but awakes with a fury in dreams and restless states. In cutting off the negative emotions and associations, the trauma survivor is also inadvertently cutting off opportunities for positive emotions and building new, positive associations and connections.

Healing begins by rebuilding the neural (brain) pathways that were overwhelmed by the intensity of the trauma. Now it is time to use those same senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—to create new positive experiences and memories. It is like a tree in the spring. After the frost and falling leaves, the tree needs to sprout new leaves and buds. As Brooks would say, part of the process of awaking from numbness and moving toward healing is to “*put as many positive experiences as you can between yourself and the traumatic event.*”

HOMEWORK

For this session’s homework you will be asked to keep track of activities that can help you use your five senses to feel less numb and more alive in daily life. [Pass out *Handout 4.2: Living Fully.*] In the bottom rows, add any other activities that you think might help you feel less numb in your daily life. See the “Making the Most of Mind-Body Healing and Health by Dr. Frank Lawlis” handout for additional guidelines.

CLOSING ACTIVITY

Before class is over, read the “Making the Most of Mind-Body Healing and Health” handout and practice effective deep breathing.

³Herman, Judith. (1997). *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books.

*Frontal Lobe/Limbic System Graphic from Beland, K & Douglass, J. (2006). *School-Connect: Optimizing the High School Experience*. Bethesda, MD: School-Connect.

MAKING THE MOST OF MIND-BODY HEALING AND HEALTH

by Dr. Frank Lawlis

Dr. Frank Lawlis, psychologist, counselor, and co-founder of the Lawlis Peavey PsychoNeuroPlasticity (PNP) Center, has dedicated decades of research and practice to helping people heal from traumatic experiences. He presents the following recommendations for effective deep breathing techniques and therapeutic PTSD-recovery music⁴.

Effective Deep Breathing: Lawlis writes: "In my forty years as a psychologist, I have seen individuals with PTSD breathe in only two ways: 1) 'rabbit rate,' short, shallow breaths at a rate around twenty to thirty breaths per minute or 2) hyperventilation, the inability to catch his or her breath. 'Rabbit rate' breaths indicate chronic anxiety and hyperventilation suggest deep fatigue and fear. Both of these patterns are detrimental to the brain because they disrupt the oxygen intake most needed for use in thinking and memory.

For effective breathing, the three areas of most importance to concentrate on are the chest, stomach, and shoulders. You will not be able to control all three from the start, but given practice and time, you will be able to advance in each area.

For the first step, place your lower hand on the navel and the other on the chest. Begin by breathing into your lower hand in your stomach area while keeping your chest stable. Once you have enough practice with that technique, start breathing in a way so that only the chest area is moving and the stomach area remains stable. After those experiences are clear, breathe only through the shoulders by slightly raising them up with each breath in, while keeping both the chest and stomach stable. After all three levels are done, begin to breath by moving all three areas (chest, stomach, and shoulders). It takes a little practice, but most people report a sense of relaxation very quickly as they open up these capacities. Try breathing into your stomach area and following the wave of movement as it goes into the chest, then the shoulders, and then exhaling back down, noticing the wavelike motion.

This method is fun to watch on the brain monitor because it shows a beautiful blend of frequencies. It's like a symphony in which all the instruments blend together in perfect harmony."

Therapeutic PTSD-Healing Music: The PsychoNeuroPlasticity (PNP) Center has developed a set of drum rhythms on CD that are designed to aid in reconnections and to orient the brain as quickly as possible. They start with a basic heartbeat and progress in complexity, much like the brain increases its complex patterning. CD titles include:

- Brain Orientation Rhythms #1: The basic heartbeat everyone uses to orient to life.
- Brain Orientation Rhythms #2: The Steady Life Rhythms of Joy
- Brain Orientation Rhythms #3: The Evolvement of Complex Emotions
- Brain Orientation Rhythms #4: The Awareness of the Emerging Self

See www.mindbodysolutionsbylawlis.com for more titles and information about ordering.

⁴Lawlis, Frank. (2010.) *The PTSD Breakthrough: The Revolutionary, Science-Based Compass RESET Program*. SourceBooks.

HANDOUT 4.1: HOW HAS NUMBNESS AFFECTED YOUR LIFE?

1. Can you relate to the sensation of feeling emotionally numb? If yes, how would you describe this feeling?

2. Think back to the days and months after your traumatic event(s). How numb do you remember feeling at that time?

1_____2_____3_____4_____5_____6_____7_____8_____9_____10
Total numbness Very numb Somewhat numb Somewhat alive & well Fully alive

3. Think of a moment since the traumatic event when you felt less numb and more alive. Describe that moment. Why do you think you felt less numb?

4. Thinking about your current life, how numb do you feel now on a regular basis?

1_____2_____3_____4_____5_____6_____7_____8_____9_____10
Total numbness Very numb Somewhat numb Somewhat alive & well Fully alive

5. What have you found in your life that helps you feel less numb and more alive?

6. What makes you feel more numb?

HANDOUT 4.2: LIVING FULLY

Waking up from numbness and reentering a fulfilling life requires deliberate effort. What are you doing this week that gives you an opportunity to use your five senses—sight, sound, taste, feel, and smell—and appreciate the potential sweetness of everyday life? Keep track of activities known to increase awareness and add activities at the bottom that you think are healthy and helpful.

Begin this journal on whatever day tomorrow is (example: Weds.) and fill in answers for each day of the week.

	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Weds.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	TOTAL
<i>Sample</i>								9
Took a walk								
Exercised 30+ min.								
Ate a delicious healthy meal								
Listened to relaxing or inspiring music								
Cleaned house								
Talked with a friend or family (for more than 5 minutes)								
Hugged someone								
Took deep slow breaths (for more than 5 minutes)								
Sang or hummed a song								
Played a game (cards, board game)								
Did a mental exercise (Puzzle, word search, crossword, Sudoku)								
Enjoyed a craft (painting, knitting, scrapbooking)								
ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:								
Add any activities below that are healthy, increase awareness, and use your senses (sight, sound, taste, feel & smell)								