Measuring One's Unique Experience of Trauma – Measuring Trauma Graphic

by Heidi Hanson

This graphic is a tool I created that trauma survivors can use to evaluate their unique experience of trauma. Everyone with PTSD and trauma symptoms has their own slightly different manifestation of the same basic theme based on their own combination of experiences.

This graphic depicts many different characteristics of what could be referred to as "Big T" trauma. I consider "Big T" trauma to refer to one impactful event or a time period of extreme stress with a clear beginning and end. It is not a tool to measure childhood trauma although it could be expanded for this purpose.

The items listed in this graphic could be turned into a formal questionnaire that results in scores measuring the severity of the traumatic event, impact of the trauma on the victim, vulnerability of the victim, coping capacity of the victim and the amount of support available. A final score could be calculated from these numbers that could indicate something related to the likelihood of developing PTSD symptoms. As research discovers more about what increases vulnerability to PTSD, these variables could be quantifiable one day.

How to Use This Tool for Your Own Self-Knowledge

You may use the variables to informally measure your trauma experience, for your own self-knowledge.

Before Measuring Yourself, First Make Sure You Will be OK Thinking About The Events

About 4 years after the traumatic events I went through, I began to be able to think about them briefly without risking being triggered by bringing up memories. So for 4 years, I would not have been able to use this trauma measuring tool because bringing my thoughts back to the traumas, even just lightly to evaluate them intellectually, would have been too triggering for me and cause a lot of emotional and physical symptoms. Before you begin just make sure you're in a good, calm space to think about your traumas and have some self-regulating skills like breathing and grounding ready if you happen to get triggered.

On The Scale, Bad Things are Higher Numbers; Good Things are Lower

Each line in this graphic is basically a spectrum of experience. I know it seems counter-intuitive, but because this is a scale about things that raise the likelihood of developing trauma related symptoms, positive (+) number scores represent negative things which could add to trauma related symptoms. Negative (-) number scores represent positive things which could take away from symptoms - the internal and external resources that make a person stronger and more resilient.

Note That Some Items Have Both Positive and Negative Numbers

On many of the variables, the scale by which they are measured does not go from 0 to 100, but rather goes in two directions. This is because some items could both help and harm a person. For example, a family member could help you out in many different ways – giving emotional support, a place to stay, bringing meals when you are very ill or in rehab, etc. All that help goes in the negative direction (0 to -100) taking away from the PTSD symptoms that might develop. Alternatively, the family member could do nothing, having no effect either way (0). Or they could harm – perhaps through abuse, ridicule, ostracism from the family, or just by making remarks like, "That never happened," or "What a drama queen!" This would fall on the positive number scale (0 to 100) because it potentially adds to PTSD symptoms.

How To Measure Yourself on the Scales

For this tool, the self-measurement is not meant to be specific and exact. Because I have not created absolute specific answers (like check here for 2-6 weeks in emergency, check here for 6 weeks - 3 months, etc.), the way you answer will be very general.

So, to fill it in, use a pen and mark a small line where you think your score is on each item; then you can use a highlighter pen and draw a bar that goes up to that line. To figure out where to mark, think - Am I at 0? Am I at 100? If you are at one of those mark it. Am I someplace in between? If so, just mark in the center of the line. In other words, for most questions there are basically 3 answers - 0, 100 or 50.

You can tweak it a bit and make it more accurate by thinking - What can I imagine would be the absolute worst answer to this question? What can I imagine would be the absolute best answer to this question? What percentage of the 100% scenario I just imagined would my own experience be? Some questions this will work with. Then you can get a bit closer to an accurate percentage and mark it that way.

Without developing this into a more extensive questionnaire with exacting quantifiable answers, this is pretty much the best we can do for now.

Exact Numbers are Less Important Than The Process of Contemplating your Life Experiences

This self-therapy exercise is not as much about an accurate numerical answer as it is about how the process makes you think about each spectrum of experience and how it affected you. For example, if you see a lot of high answers up near the top of the scale, you get a visual confirmation that you've been through a lot, even if the numbers are not exact.

As you fill it in, go slowly to allow yourself to open to new understandings.

Then, once you've filled the whole thing in, reflect on where your experiences fall and how this very personal combination of factors could have contributed to or reduced trauma related symptoms for you.

You may ponder what outcomes may have changed if various variables had happened differently.

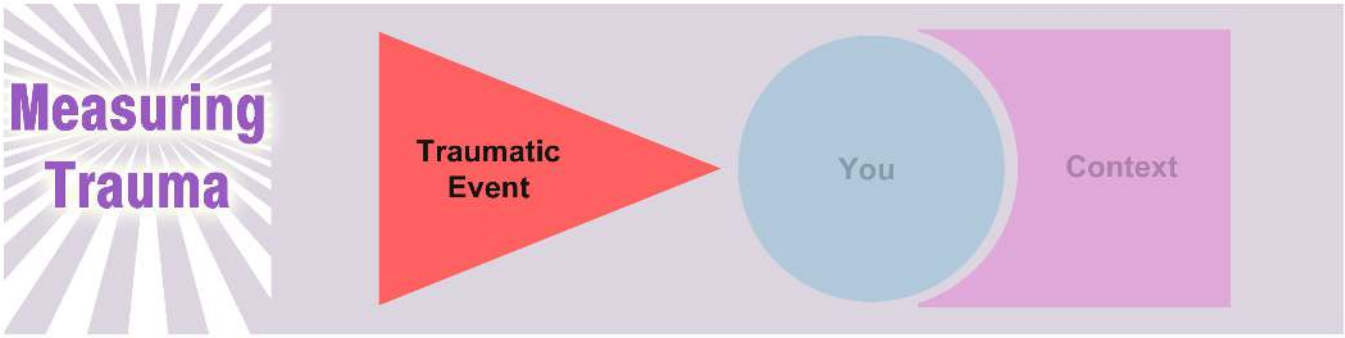
If there are any very high areas - these are things that have impacted you the most - you may want to focus on them in therapy.

About The Validation Versus Disenfranchisement Spectrum

Note that I gave the "Validation" spectrum 3 lines of its very own – Validation-SOCIAL, Validation – MEDIA and Validation – FAMILY.

The reason I isolated validation is because traumas that are not socially sanctioned - that are *disenfranchised, socially negated, or socially unspeakable* - could potentially complicate the symptoms of PTSD. Anything a person experiences that is outside of conventional thought and the status quo could be met with disbelief, prejudice, ridicule and judgement. Being rejected by family members and especially by professionals one goes to for help could cause emotional pain and shame, and lead to strong avoidance regarding seeking help. Each instance of invalidation could be thought of as an additional trauma to deal with.

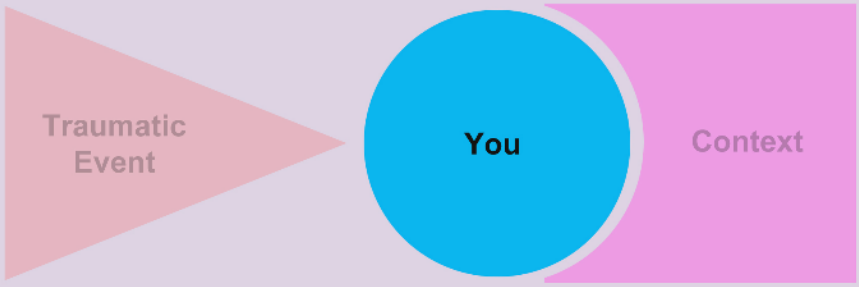
If you have received stigma, disenfranchisement, ridicule, disbelief, ostracism, minimizing of truth of seriousness, dismissal, social pressure to be quiet, being ignored or unfair judgement from society, media, and/or family, know that these may constitute additional traumas and can disrupt the healing process in various ways, therefore they have a sizeable impact on the severity of your symptoms.



Traumatic Event - Characteristics

	0 ⟷ 100
1. PROXIMITY	
How close were you to the source of harm?	far away <----------> close
2. THREAT	
What was the level of intensity of the threat?	I was witness (no threat to me)<----------> I almost died
3. TIME IN DANGER ZONE	
How much time threatened by serious injury/bodily harm/death?	seconds <--->minutes<---->days<----->months<-----> years
4. TIME BEING HARMED	
How much time were you actually being harmed or violated?	seconds <----------> months
5. TIME BELIEVING DYING	
How long did you believe you would die/were dying?	seconds <----------> months
6. HORROR	
How horrific was this event?	not horrific <----------> extremely horrific
7. TIME IN EMERGENCY	
How much time were you addressing an emergency situation?	seconds <----------> months
8. TIME IN PAIN	
How much time were you in physical pain?	seconds <----------> years
9. PHYSICAL INJURY	
How much physical injury was sustained?	no damage <----------> entire body damaged
10. FREQUENCY	
How frequently did the trauma occur?	one time <----------> many times, for years
11. INCONGRUITY	
How incongruous was this in comparison to your daily routine?	low discontinuity/incongruity<-->jarring,shockingly different
12. SUDDENNESS	
How sudden was the event, was there any warning?	predictable, there was warning <---> unpredictable,sudden
13. BETRAYAL	
Did you experience betrayal in association with the trauma?	no betrayal <----------> shocking betrayal
14. CRUELTY	
Was anyone being cruel to you?	not cruel <----------somewhat cruel----------> very cruel
15. RELATIONSHIP	
What is the nature of the relationship(s) involved in the event?	impersonal <-----anonymous/stranger--> close relationship
16. LOSS	
Did you lose someone as a result of the event?	nobody lost <----------> lost someone(s) close to me
17. CONTROL	
How much control did you have in the situation?	control, ability to fight or flee <----------> helpless

Measuring Trauma



You - Internal Experience

	0 ⟷ 100
FEAR	none----------fear----------intense fear----------shock, paralyzing fear
IMMOBILITY	none----------complete helplessness, paralysis of muscles, mind
TIME IN SHOCK	none-------seconds----------days
DISSOCIATION	none-----dizziness, disorientation----------high level of dissociation, repeated dissociative state
INTEGRATION	more ability to integrate experience----------complete overwhelm of system, no ability to integrate
MIND	mind stayed integrated----------experienced a mental break
REJECTION	can accept----------some trouble accepting----------state of disbelief----------full out refuse to accept
CHAOS	none--some confusion----------total chaos and confusion inside
SHAME	not ashamed----------some shame----------feel very ashamed
GUILT	not guilty----------feel very guilty, concept of having "sinned"
TIME	time was normal----------experienced time slowing or stopping
SHUT DOWN	emotional reaction----------emotional numbness, flat affect
LOSS SELF	no loss of self----------gets cut off from of some aspect of self
MEMORY	no memory impairment----------loss of memories prior to and/or during event; amnesia

You - Characteristics

	-100 ⟷ 0 ⟷ 100
AGE	more resourced adult----------less resourced child
RESILIENCY	have skills for psychological resiliency and adaptability----------rigid, weak, vulnerable
TRAUMA HISTORY	no trauma history-----sparse trauma history----------full trauma history
KNOWLEDGE	more knowledgeable about PTSD----------less knowledgeable----------misinfomred
COGNITION	thoughts, beliefs, interpretations, and assigned meanings (framing) helpful----------harmful
SELF-HEALING	self-healing skills and capacity high ----------self-harm
WILL	will, determination and desire to heal high ----------unconsciously want to stay sick
COPING SKILLS	coping mechanisms healthy----------coping mechanisms unhealthy

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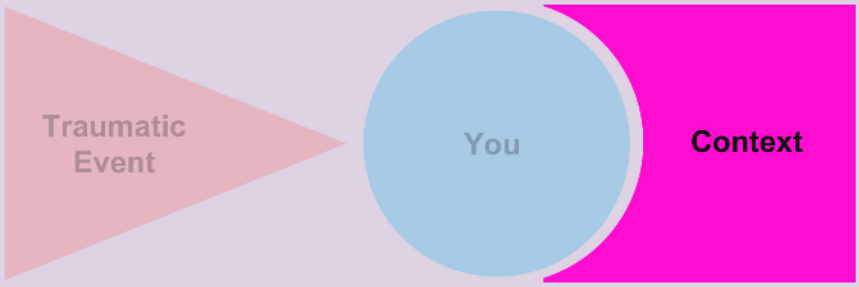

-100 ⟷ 0 ⟷ 100

Context - Characteristics of Help

TIME BEFORE HELP	immediate----------very long time----------never
QUANTITY OF HELP	lots of help----------no help
QUALITY OF HELP	expert quality help----------help that does nothing----------help that harms
ONGOING HELP	consistent help over time----------sporadic----------no ongoing support

Context - Sources of Help or Harm

FAMILY	lots of family support----------no family support----------family harms
PARTNER	lots of partner support----------no partner support----------partner harms
FRIENDS	lots of friend support----------no friend support----------friends harm
WORK	lots of support at work----------no support from work--------work rejects, harms
MEDICAL	lots of support in medical system----------no medical system support--------medical system harms
GOVERNMENT	lots of support from government (e.g. justice dept., social programs)---no gov't support------gov't harms
MEDIA	lots of media support (news, social media, internet sites, etc)----no media support---------media harms
SCHOOL	lots of school support----------no school support----------school harms
NONPROFITS	lots of support from nonprofit agencies/community centers-----no nonprofit support-----nonprofit harms
THERAPY	lots of support from therapist(s)----------no therapist support----------therapist harms

Context - Types of Help or Harm

Validation-SOCIAL	100% understood/sympathy---socially denied/covered up--social rejection/stigma/disenfranchisement
Validation-MEDIA	lots of validation and understanding from the media----------disbelief and rejection
Validation-FAMILY	lots of validation and understanding from family----------disbelief and rejection
Physical Resuscitation	expert timely help to revive----------wasn't helped but survived----------harmed
Physical Rehabilitation	expert help with physical rehabilitation from injuries------partial help-----did it alone----------harmed
Physical Health	expert help with physical health overall----------no help----------harmed
Physical Health Ed	quality info about how to recover physically----------no help----------misinformation
Physical Assets	receive gifts, donations----------assets taken away
Financial Assistance	receive financial help----------harmed financially
Psychological Health	expert help with psychological challenges----------psychological harm
Psychological Health-Ed	quality info about how to recover psychologically----------no help---------misinformation
Books, Internet	lots of exposure to helpful books, videos on the subject----------no exposure---------misinformation

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negative (-) number scores represent that which could take away from symptoms