

#UNHARMABLE

Module 1: The Origins of Core False Beliefs

From Chapter 1 of Conscious Recovery

During our early life we began making agreements. Our parents rewarded us when we did what they wanted and they punished us when we didn't. We also learned behaviors and habits in school, church, and from other adults and children on the playground. The tools of reward and punishment were often emotional and sometimes physical. The impact of other people's opinions and reactions to us became a very strong force in the habits we created. In this process we created agreements in our mind of who we should be, what we shouldn't be, who we were, and who we were not. Over time we learned to live our life based on the agreements in our own mind. We learned to live according to the agreements that came from the opinion of others. In this process of domestication, it turns out that the choices we make and the life we live is more driven by the opinions we learned from others than one we would choose on our own.

— Don Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements*

What Is Unresolved Trauma?

The word "trauma" can bring to mind certain ideas or associations. War zones may come to mind, or serious accidents, or the loss of someone close to you, or childhood abuse. You may have read about research on the physical, mental, and emotional impacts of PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress

Disorder) on returning soldiers and victims of abuse, and maybe you've experienced some of those impacts yourself. But we don't often hear about the spiritual effects of trauma, or about how a spiritual perspective can help us heal. When you begin to uncover the roots of your addiction, very often you find unresolved trauma. In this module, I invite you to take a spiritual approach to your unresolved trauma, to connect with your innermost self and unveil the spiritual source of your suffering.

In her book, *The Trauma Tool Kit: Healing PTSD from the Inside Out*, Susan P. Bannit provides the following definition of trauma: "Traumatic events by definition overwhelm our ability to cope. When the mind becomes flooded with emotion, a circuit breaker is thrown that allows us to survive the experience fairly intact. That is, without becoming psychotic or frying out one of the brain centers. The cost of this blown circuit is emotion frozen within the body. In other words, we often unconsciously stop feeling our trauma part way into it, like a movie that is still going after the sound has been turned off. We cannot heal until we move fully through that trauma, including all of the feelings of that event." Trauma is something that overwhelms our ability to cope. And unresolved trauma continues to hurt us because we are stuck in the traumatic experience.

Let's explore this more deeply. You've probably heard of "fight or flight," right? Those are the body's reactions to danger, and in the moment of trauma, when the body is flooded with adrenaline, those are its strategies for coping. But when the experience is overwhelming, there's a third survival strategy: to freeze. When we freeze, we detach, we leave the room, we lock away whatever part of the experience is most threatening to us. We stop being present to the traumatic experience. This is also called dissociation.

Dissociation can get us through the immediate trauma, but unfortunately, that “frozen emotion” can get trapped in the body, resulting in all kinds of ill effects over time. Someone who experiences repeated physical abuse growing up, for example, can experience a psychological and a spiritual impact that gets stored in the body and remains there long after the obvious physical damage is healed. If we’ve gone numb often enough in response to abuse or injury, numbness becomes a habit. And it’s a dangerous habit, because the pain and suffering are still there, stuck in our bodies. Walking around with that kind of unresolved pain is a root cause of addiction. If the trauma that’s trapped in our body gets reactivated every time we hear a certain sound or see a certain person, if things in our everyday life can retrigger that powerful fight, flight, or freeze response—that can make it incredibly hard to function. So, we may turn to things that help us cope, like addictive substances or behaviors.

Before we get too far into the consequences of trauma, let’s examine how the different types of trauma—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and vicarious—can wound us long after the initial event, and how that can lead to an addicted life. As we discuss these different types of trauma, remember that our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual selves are not in fact separate; these categories are just constructs to help us understand.

Physical Trauma

Physical trauma encompasses many different experiences, including physical abuse, domestic violence, assault, self-injury, natural disaster, an automobile accident, or battlefield trauma, to name a few. Medically speaking, physical trauma is a severe injury to the body, whatever the cause.

The way an individual responds to physical trauma depends on the level of trauma as well as on their individual resiliency and support systems. Let's look at a few of the possible responses to and the effects of physical trauma.

To begin with, it's not uncommon for some of the physical and emotional responses to shut down during trauma. Many people, for example, report feeling no physical pain in the moments after a traumatic injury—the pain centers of the brain simply stop registering pain levels. In the longer term, physical trauma can also have consequences beyond the initial injury, including shock, loss of organ function, infection and sepsis, and even a disruption of genetic functioning. Then there's the impact of the life-saving treatments we might undergo after the trauma, which can themselves be very distressing. Long-term emotional responses to physical trauma can include anxiety, flashbacks, unpredictable emotions, and other types of emotional distress.

The way we recover from physical trauma seems to depend in part on how long-standing it is. If you have good support systems and are relatively healthy, you might withstand an intense but short-lived trauma, like being injured in a car accident, with few long-term effects. But a physical trauma that happens over time, such as chronic, long-term physical abuse, neglect, domestic violence, or multiple tours of combat duty, can be more difficult to recover from. This kind of trauma, called "complex trauma," can have very deep psychological and spiritual impacts, including trouble in trusting others, difficulty controlling emotions, behaviors, and higher levels of stress, which in turn can damage the immune system, impede brain development, and result in long-term damage to our emotional and physical health. If we experience this sort of trauma, it's going to affect how we perceive ourselves and our world. Even if the physical wounds are mended, there is a

psychological and a spiritual impact that gets stored in the body and is harder to heal. Thus unresolved physical trauma can be a root cause of addiction, because walking around with that kind of pain often leads us to turn to substances and behaviors that ease our suffering, but can also become addictive.

Mental Trauma

It seems that the vast majority of us experience some degree of mental trauma in childhood simply by receiving repeated messages of untruth. This mental trauma can be inflicted by otherwise loving parents, teachers, and other adults who are simply passing down what they themselves were taught as children. As children, most of us learn lies about ourselves and our world instead of the truth of our inherent wholeness. Being taught a worldview that assumes that the world is governed by limitation, fear, separation, or aggression can make us believe, at a fundamental level, that the world is not safe. This mental trauma is an injury to our understanding of the world.

Think for a moment about whether and how this took place as you grew up. I know that most of the adults in my own childhood taught me that the world wasn't fair, that the world wasn't safe and that there was a lot of scarcity. I received both overt and covert messages that I wouldn't amount to anything and might as well just accept a life of limitation. The reason I bring this very common experience into the conversation about trauma is that it is genuinely rather traumatic to be taught something that is so counter to the ultimate truth of our existence. These lies are traumatic. They injure us because they enter our psyches and distort the way we see ourselves. They

become our core beliefs, our core false beliefs. When we walk around believing things like, “The world is not safe,” or “Life is a struggle,” or “I’m fundamentally unworthy,” then it makes sense to live in a permanent state of fight, flight, or freeze response.

When we live in a world that seems unsafe and unloving, there’s a tendency to create a safety zone and never move outside of those boundaries. So, we stop growing, because growth only happens when we expand our comfort zone. People who have experienced mental trauma—and again, that’s virtually all of us who are here in this human realm—have been taught some sort of lie about their essential nature. For us to expand outside of our comfort zone can often feel disorienting and frightening. This is because we’ve unconsciously created a safety zone that on one hand seems to keep us feeling safe, but on another hand, keeps us absolutely stuck in limited ways of seeing ourselves.

Emotional Trauma

Emotional trauma can be inflicted by a primary caregiver who is in their own addiction and not able to offer the love and connection we need. It can also come from teachers, ministers, and the like who are still operating from their “woundology,” as my friend and colleague Temple Hayes puts it. It can be caused by peers; the proverbial “kid on the playground” acting as a bully. Being repeatedly mocked, insulted, and criticized can make us feel, at a fundamental level, that we are less than, not good enough, and/or unlovable. This is emotional trauma—injury to our emotional well-being.

The following story illustrates how emotional trauma gets stored in our bodies. Some years ago, I was in a motorcycle accident that resulted in me breaking two vertebrae in my upper back. After some healing time had passed, my doctor let me know it was safe to begin getting some deep-tissue massage work done to alleviate the pain I was experiencing. After my first session, my massage therapist let me know that the vertebrae had healed completely, but the muscles around the vertebrae had tightened to protect the vertebrae (even though they no longer actually needed protecting). It was not the vertebrae that needed to mend, it was now the tightness in the muscles that needed to be “worked out” in order for the pain to be dissipated.

Even though this particular story is about physical trauma, it serves as a metaphor regarding how our psyches can still hold the emotional trauma and hurts from our past. The traumatic event is no longer occurring, but our “freeze” instinct still believes we need protecting. We need to work out the emotional scars associated with the original trauma in order to be free. The spiritual journey, as I hope you’re beginning to see, is about reconnecting with your essential truth. You are whole, you are perfect, you are love, and you are loved exactly the way you are.

Spiritual Trauma

Now we move into spiritual trauma, which is very prevalent in our culture and in our world. Spiritual trauma is inflicted when we are not seen as the deepest truth of who and what we are. It is all too common to be taught ideas about ourselves and the world that are counter to this fundamental truth of our being. When we are not seen in this authentic light, we have what is called spiritual disconnection, which is a separation from our

essential self. We will be covering this in a more in-depth way in module 2 of this course.

There is a big difference between spirituality and religion. Spirituality is about connection with our essence, and is the deepest truth of what it means to be human. We come into this world with an innate sense of knowing this. We are naturally connected with ourselves, with nature, and with all of life. Religion is an attempt to make sense of spirituality, but all too often, the dogma of religions (rules, tenets, and ideology) create strict guidelines that can cause damage.

Sometimes religion is used to teach us things that don't confirm the ultimate truth of who and what we are. For example, some religions teach the idea of fundamental sin, they teach that we're inherently bad in some way. They teach that only belief in this particular God or practice of this particular religion can save us from our state of fundamental evil. When that message about our fundamental brokenness and dependence is repeated over and over again, when it's illustrated and lived by an authority and an institution that our parents and others around us respect and follow, then it naturally seeps into our spirits and breaks down our relationship with the fundamental truth of who we are. This is spiritual trauma; it is an injury to our spirit.

One tragic consequence of spiritual trauma is a turning away from Spirit. I've seen it countless times. As people grow and learn they begin to come up against the logical inconsistencies in the religious untruths they were taught as children. I have friends who say they woke up one day and realized that 75% of the world didn't follow their religion. They then began to question how a loving God could consign 75% of the world to damnation. This sort of questioning can open us up to spiritual growth. But, all too often, when

we encounter these inconsistencies we stop the process cold, and turn away from our spiritual side altogether. This turning away is understandable. For one, the notion of salvation being limited by "correct" belief just doesn't make sense to us anymore. But on a deeper level, the very mention of religion or the slightest experience of Spirit can become a trigger for the religious or spiritual trauma we underwent in our youth. The trauma has so affected our outlook that we can see no way to be spiritual in life.

Vicarious Trauma

I often work with clients who say they have not experienced trauma in their lives, but upon further investigation, they begin to recognize that they have experienced what is called vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma, simply put, is witnessing a traumatic event or ongoing trauma perpetrated on someone else. This can be witnessing a horrific accident, or seeing someone physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually abused once or over an extended period of time. This type of trauma can sometimes get overlooked, because someone might say a variation of "But, he never abused me," or "I only saw it happen, I was not hurt." The truth is, this type of trauma can be very agonizing because there might be multiple layers to the experience. For example, someone might carry guilt or shame because they were not able to prevent the accident, or they believe they "should have" done something to stop the violence. One example of this is when children witness one parent abusing the other one. These incidents can leave very profound wounds that need to be addressed in order to find resolution and freedom from vicarious trauma.

The Consequences of Unresolved Trauma

As you can see, all types of trauma: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and vicarious, lead us back to a distressing separation from our essential self, a false sense that we are inherently broken in some way. Let's look further at some of the consequences of this ongoing injury.

As the earlier story explained, trauma lives in our bodies. If we have unresolved trauma, the responses of fight, flight, or freeze, which are very hard on our nervous systems, can be triggered by everyday physical experiences, and over time this chronic stress takes a toll on our bodies and spirits in addition to the direct physical effect of the trauma. Trauma can take up residence in the body, in effect reinjuring us each time it's activated. It also has been linked to multiple physical diseases.

Whether it's physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual injury that we experience, unresolved trauma can result in a sense that something is fundamentally wrong or broken. And that feeling can get buried deep in the subconscious (the part of our psyche that is not easily accessible to the conscious mind). Let's say you believe that there is something fundamentally wrong with you. You have a core false belief that you're not lovable. What are you going to do? How are you going to respond to this reality? If you're walking around with the unconscious or subconscious belief that you're not lovable, you may very well try to find all sorts of experiences to counter that. You may become addicted to relationships, love, or sex. You are searching for something outside of yourself to try to undo the core false belief that you're not lovable.

But, quite often, what happens is the opposite. The feeling tone that you hold about yourself is what actually creates what you call reality. So, even though on the surface you may be grabbing for and striving for all sorts of experiences in order to feel love, you're still holding a vibration or a belief about yourself as unlovable. The deeply held feeling tone that you're not lovable works on an unconscious level to attract people who only confirm that negative core false belief. Conversely, you also may tend to be attracted to these very people, in a kind of self-sabotaging reinforcement of those false beliefs.

Trauma and the Unconscious

At Agape Bay Area, our spiritual community in Oakland, we are blessed with a wonderful musician, a beautiful spirit whose contributions to our community are immense. She grew up in the segregated South, and one of the rules of segregation she experienced as a child was that she could not be on the sidewalk at the same time as a white person. If she was walking along and saw a white person coming toward her, she would have to step off the sidewalk and let that person pass. This experience, repeated over and over again, in addition to all of the other experiences of racism and segregation she underwent, entered into her on a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual level, so that even now, decades later, the simple act of walking down the sidewalk can sometimes trigger those feelings of fight, flight, or freeze. It's a stress response that comes up even though the laws of segregation are no longer in place, and few people today would even think of expecting her to move off the sidewalk. This is the kind of impact that lives on in our bodies after trauma of any kind, whether it be

emotional trauma, marginalization, ridicule, or physical violence. These experiences live in our bodies.

Here is an example of a previous client, whom we will call "James." He was chronically insulted and ridiculed for not being like "the other boys" as a child and he experienced frequent bullying at school and at home for his burgeoning sexual orientation. Thus, he came to have a deeply unconscious core false belief that he was unlovable. On a conscious level, he yearned for love and connection. But his core false belief, the vibration he was expressing, worked against his yearning, and his experiences tended to reinforce that vibration. He repeatedly was attracted to, and fell for, men who could not possibly love him for various reasons. So, rather than providing James with the love that he sought, these relationships only reinforced his destructive core false belief.

James' story illustrates the power of unresolved trauma to perpetuate the original injury—in James' case the emotional trauma of his childhood was retriggered every time someone rejected him, in turn reinforcing the false belief in his own brokenness. When we resist the inner work of recognizing the impact of unresolved trauma on our life and our outlook, we aren't able to unlearn and undo the lies we've been told about ourselves. Until we do that deeper work, we will continue to replicate the relationships that confirm this negative core false belief. That's why we fall into unhealthy, even addictive patterns. That's why we say over and over again, "I thought he was going to be different" or "I thought this relationship was not going to be like the others." We simply can't find solutions to our inner turmoil by looking to the outer realm.

When we're in denial about what's authentically happening, our behaviors can become self-sabotaging. We've all seen it happen: people who appear to be incredibly focused and dedicated suddenly fail in a spectacular way. They do something to sabotage their own success. It's baffling because it seems out of character with what we see on the surface. But what's actually going on underneath is that the person is struggling with a core false belief about their own worthiness that stems from childhood trauma. Underneath all that striving, competition, and focus on success is an unconscious belief of "I'm not worthy." And this is the belief that trips them up in the crucial moment. So, trauma can block us from our full expression. Being in denial about what's really happening in the unconscious can prevent us from connecting spiritually with our true essence. The core false beliefs that result from unresolved trauma can trap us in a limited and limiting reality that keeps us from true healing.

Victim Consciousness

How does this relate to an addicted life? Remember, we're talking about addiction as a brilliant strategy that's no longer working; using something outside of ourselves to try to fix something that feels broken within. The connection is simple. If trauma has led us to walk around with a sense of brokenness, then we naturally turn to things outside ourselves to attempt to repair that feeling of brokenness. The trouble is, if we've allowed the trauma response to get buried in our subconscious, then it begins to run the show. The trauma defines us and colors all our experiences. We come to believe that we are, fundamentally, victims. Let me be clear: This does not mean that we weren't possibly victimized when the trauma happened. I'm not saying that the trauma you underwent was your responsibility, or your fault.

Not at all. What I am saying is that, because of the trauma, we can sometimes take on the identity of a victim. We can sometimes start believing and saying things like “I am a victim,” or “I am powerless” which only concretizes this victim mentality into our consciousness.

Unfortunately, part of trauma’s power is that it can lead us to believe that the brokenness it leaves us with is fundamental, it’s an essential part of who we are. When we are victims of trauma we often fall into a sense of powerlessness or hopelessness, a belief that we are never going to be able to reconnect with the truth of who we are. This leaves us feeling like we're victims to the entire world. It leaves us feeling as if the problem is outside of us and so the solution must be outside of us as well. To me, that is addiction in its simplest form; trying to fix something that feels broken inside by turning to solutions on the outside.

Healing from Trauma

Healing when we’ve experienced trauma can involve all four rooms of our human house: the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. If you’ve suffered the ongoing effects of trauma, I invite you to start by working with a trauma specialist (for example, someone who specializes in Somatic Experiencing® or E.M.D.R.). This is someone who can help you to create safe places and relationships in which to break free from the cycle of replicating trauma in your life, and also begin to do the deeper inner work of unlearning: clearly looking within, recognizing the core false beliefs and the stories that you have about yourself and the world.

Then you can experience what I call “The Great Remembering,” which is reconnecting with your essential self, waking up to this greater reality of who and what you are and from there witnessing life. In other words, when we unlearn and remember, we are no longer bound by our stories. We can break free from the traumatic stories that have trapped us in an old way of being and an old way of seeing the world that is at best limited but oftentimes replicates the trauma in ways that injure us at many levels. We will cover this in a more in-depth way in the upcoming modules in this course.