

Stop the Struggle: 5 Steps to Breaking Free from Chronic Emotional Pain & the Dreaded Inner Critic

It's our first meeting. 'Janet' a 36 year old professional woman sits quietly across from me. Within moments her eyes well up with tears. When I ask her what she is experiencing, she tells me she is relieved to be talking about the anxiety that has been troubling her since she was a young girl.

But, she says, it's hard to feel optimistic that she will be able to recover as she's been feeling this way most of her life, and can't figure out why. When I ask Janet when her anxiety started she says she can't remember, but that she's always felt this way. She explains that she was shy and nervous as a child and teenager. She tells me about growing up in a family where her father drank sometimes, and her mother was periodically sad and distant. She describes her parents as "loving, but not always there for me". This was very confusing for Janet, but she does not see herself as having been neglected or abused. She reports feeling guilty talking about her parents this way.

In spite of this difficult start in life, Janet has managed to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher and a mother, though her marriage ended when her daughter was 3 years old. She is concerned about the way that anxiety can interfere with her performance at work, and she doesn't want to "pass this worry down to my daughter".

I ask Janet about her vision for a better future, and what it would take to get there. "Confidence", she says, "and calm". "I'd be able to believe in myself no matter what difficulties life throws at me". My heart goes out to Janet. She was raised in a home where emotional support and comfort were in short supply as her parents were preoccupied with their own problems. While not overtly abused as such, Janet was neglected, and struggles to feel emotionally safe in the world, or to know how to comfort herself under stress.

She does not know it yet, but Janet has come to therapy to learn how to 're- parent' herself - in essence to become a positive mirror reflecting back faith in herself, so she can eventually come to support herself emotionally in ways that were missing in her childhood. Together we begin to identify Janet's goals for counselling - the results she is looking for to feel better. Janet leaves her first counselling session feeling hopeful that she can look forward to putting her anxiety behind her. We work together to help her understand the roots of her worries and, most importantly, how to overcome her anxiety in the here and now by experiencing and expressing her true emotions, and confronting negative beliefs that cause her to feel anxious. These strategies become internalized

over time, so eventually she can apply them herself, outside of therapy.

By the end of therapy - 7 months later - Janet is at peace with herself and her past. She is no longer feeling controlled by anxiety.

Janet's story isn't uncommon or unusual. Many smart, successful people with chronic anxiety, sadness or self doubt recognize that something is not right, but have trouble putting their finger on the source of the difficulty. Sometimes these problems started in childhood and stem from troubled family relationships. At other times problems arise due to multiple stressors or losses over a lifetime. Or harm occurs due to traumatic experiences that create ongoing psychological challenges.

Many people feel worried, sad or flawed as a result of a lifetime of struggles. Often they have not received enough support from parental figures, and don't know how to comfort themselves or ask for help. Sometimes they turn to addictive behaviors in an attempt to console themselves. But this consolation is always short lived, as it's a detour and not the right solution to the problem.

Resolution of chronic emotional pain starts by understanding the roots of a problem in order to free oneself from harmful thinking patterns, beliefs, emotions or behavior. It's also important to find healthy ways to be reconciled with the past, in order to live fully and contentedly in the present.

If long standing hurt is running interference in your life, the information I'm about to share with you should be very helpful. Read on to discover how to put this 'unfinished business' behind you, so you can start to feel at peace today.

Step 1/ Recognize & Understand the Impact of Chronic Emotional Pain

What is Chronic Emotional Pain?

In essence, lingering emotional hurt is an unhealed psychological 'injury' that can make you prone to worry or feel pessimistic about life. Unresolved emotional pain can be unconscious - simmering just below the surface - where you are aware that you don't feel happy or at ease, but don't know why. This hurt can also be more overt, where you notice that pain from the past seems to be directly contributing to mood swings, worry or negative expectations.

Chronic emotional pain is caused by a number of factors, including relationship stress or break down in family, arising from ongoing conflict, separation, divorce, addicted or otherwise absent parents. It can also be caused by sudden or traumatic experiences such as death of a child or parent, physical or mental health problems in family members, poverty, war or other upheavals that undermine security and stability. Childhood neglect or mistreatment such as lack of emotional support, constant criticism, verbal threats or physical punishment can also play a huge role in creating unhealed emotional wound known as Complex Trauma, which tends to manifest as lingering PTSD symptoms, including chronic anxiety and false shame. In short, chronic emotional distress tends to have its roots in past hurts, and gets amplified by cumulative or relentless stressors and challenges over a lifetime, that the sufferer does not know how to cope with effectively.

How Difficult Early Emotional Experiences Can Continue to Cause Problems For You Throughout Life

If you are like many people I've worked with in counselling who've had long standing challenges, you may not see yourself as having been neglected, abused or traumatized. You may struggle to understand why you've had such a tough time for long periods of your life. You might even feel guilty for having the painful emotions you are grappling with. What you may not realize is how much your childhood experiences have impacted your life. It's possible that you've had a fairly positive upbringing, but have also have had some difficult experiences that are negatively impacting your life today in major ways.

In addition to challenges in childhood, any distressing experiences or major losses can cause you to get stuck in pain and prevent you from enjoying life in the present. This pain can appear as ongoing problems with stress or anxiety, depressed thinking, feeling traumatized, chronic grief, addictive or compulsive behaviors, low self worth and relationship problems. It can also be reflected in feelings of inadequacy or loss of confidence.

If you are dealing with ongoing emotional pain, your sense of self worth likely needs strengthening. You may be prone to negative beliefs or fears, and feel pessimistic or insecure. You could be experiencing prolonged grief from earlier losses, leading to difficulty enjoying life in the present. Emotional 'fatigue' or frustration may make you want to escape, leaving you vulnerable to 'self medicating' through compulsive behavior, such as substance abuse, binge eating or relationship obsession. Whatever problems you are struggling with, the key is to develop healthy strategies that help you understand and overcome this pain.

How You Can Begin to Heal From ‘The Pain That Won’t Go Away’

The good news is that increasing your understanding of the roots of chronic emotional pain - and becoming more aware of when pain has been triggered - sets the stage to freeing you from it. Before you can make positive changes, you need to know what you are dealing with. Fortunately this type of awareness can be developed. Recognizing when hurtful patterns are controlling you will help you make choices that will interrupt the pain cycle and allow you to cope better.

You also need to understand what kind of pain – anxiety, low self worth, depression, trauma or grief – you are dealing with, so you can find the right solution that fits the particular problem. For example, if you feel anxious you need to use strategies that target overcoming anxiety, such as physical relaxation and overcoming fear based beliefs and expectations. Learning to identify ‘early warning signs’ that tell you that chronic emotional pain has been triggered will enable you to intervene before problems with stress, anxiety, depression or trauma become overwhelming.

You can then face life’s challenges – regardless of how long they have been going on - feeling more confident and hopeful about your ability to cope effectively and feel at peace.

How Counselling Can Help

Counselling can help you make sense of your experience, so you can then make conscious choices you believe in and benefit you. In other words, by learning to identify and better understand what you are struggling with, and why you continue to struggle, counselling sets the stage for healing. When you are able to more deeply understand the problem you are dealing with – whether it’s stress, anxiety, low self esteem or sadness - counselling can then help direct you towards emotional recovery and developing appropriate strategies to overcome the problem.

Step 2/ Identify ‘Early Warning Signs’ and Triggers So You Can Stop the Pain from Escalating

People with deep-rooted emotional distress are often unaware they are in pain as it’s become habitual and unconscious; or emotional hurt manifests as physical pain, so it’s hard to recognize the signs. Here are some examples that illustrate the problem: 1/ you wake up with a tension headache, not realizing you feel anxious; 2/ you struggle with low self worth due to unrecognized negative core beliefs that cause depressed thinking; 3/ you feel numb, and don’t connect this to traumatic losses you experienced a long time ago; 4/ you feel sad much of the time, but have decided that’s just who you are, not

realizing that your mood is linked to past hurts that are precipitated by present day triggers that are reminiscent of the original hurt.

Being unaware of harmful beliefs is particularly problematic because they control your moods, emotions and behavior, undermining your quality of life. However you can learn to recognize when you are starting to sink into a negative mood, take control of the situation and improve your frame of mind. The first step is to become aware of early warning signs that old wounds have been reopened, so you can then take steps to prevent the pain from escalating. Here's how:

1/ Recognize the 'Early Warning Signs' (EWS) of Chronic Emotional Pain

- Early Warning Signs can be Physical, Mental or Emotional.
- You feel younger than your actual age, possibly like a child, when a precipitating event - aka a Trigger - happens that makes you feel angry, upset or sad.
- Your emotional reaction to a situation – often in hindsight - feels too strong/out of proportion to the event that occurred.
- You feel fearful and anxious about life or a specific challenge in spite of evidence that you can take care of yourself and/or manage the situation you find yourself in.
- You feel sad and preoccupied about events that occurred years or decades ago, but can't seem to "let them go"
- You are afraid to do or say anything that might disappoint, upset or anger your parents, even though you are now an adult.
- You have frequent intrusive dreams or nightmares.
- You feel 'frozen', angry or overwhelmed in the face of certain types of memories or stressors.
- You believe you have never coped well with stress or never felt happy - like you were 'born' anxious or blue.
- Interpersonally, you find it hard to get close to others, though this is what you long for. You are suspicious of those who seem trustworthy. You have trouble committing. You are argumentative in relationships. You choose uncaring, unreliable or unavailable friends or partners.

- Notice your own unique Early Warning Signs. Do they show up as muscle cramps or tightness in your body and/or shallow breathing? Do you wake up in a dark mood or find yourself suddenly feeling hopeless or tearful? Do you experience pessimistic or fearful thinking, or have negative expectations? Do you feel panicky, overwhelmed or paralyzed by inertia? Or do you notice yourself feeling spaced out, going numb or going blank? Do you consciously or unconsciously push people away who wish to get closer to you?

- **Triggers:** Remember that negative moods don't come out of the blue. Try to identify what caused your low mood – in other words, what your unique Triggers are. Sometimes it can be unconscious negative beliefs that are controlling your thoughts and emotions. Perhaps a negative interaction with someone has left you questioning your self worth. Nightmares can also trigger a low mood. Take time to figure out what is going on and implement appropriate strategies to counter the negative mood shifts. See Specific Strategies below for dealing with Anxiety, Depression, Trauma, Chronic Grief or Addictive Behavior.

It's important to discover your EWS because this is the easiest and most effective time to intervene and interrupt a pain episode. Before the pain from the past gets grip on you, determine what triggered the incident. Was it something going on inside yourself, interpersonal or out in the public sphere? Was it a memory, a thought, an emotion, an interaction or a situation you found yourself in?

Identifying your unique triggers will help you be less vulnerable to negative mood shifts, and enable you to make choices that protect you from slipping deeper into anxiety, depression, grief or traumatic reactions. As you become more familiar with recognizing and interrupting emotional distress your pain will diminish over time, and your healthy coping strategies will become second nature.

How Counselling Can Help

Counselling can help you 1/ become more familiar with your unique emotional 'triggers' and early warning signs of distress that can quickly engulf you - making you feel controlled by negative emotions or moods, and; 2/ develop a plan to manage early warning signs, so the pain doesn't intensify, and you can feel better, more quickly.

Step 3/ Develop Core Strategies for Overcoming Emotional Pain and Past Hurts

Picking the Solution That Fits the Problem

If you find yourself triggered into stress, anxiety, sadness, grief or trauma ask yourself “Is this a problem that: 1/ requires change or acceptance?; and, 2/ I can deal with on my own, or need the help of a therapist?” Implementing constructive solutions is where confidence and mastery will come from.

Start by acknowledging your painful feelings to yourself. This can be a challenge if you have been criticized or unsupported when experiencing difficult emotions in the past. It can help to express your feelings by writing them down. It is also important to pinpoint what happened to make you feel upset, and how you plan to deal with it in the future. Understanding the causes of emotional distress helps you predict and minimize or avoid upset in the first place. From there you can make choices about how to deal with recurring patterns of negative thinking or interpersonal situations that can cause problems. Next, honestly identify your strengths. For example, ‘Even though I am feeling sad, I am still a caring person, able to go to work, take care of my kids, don’t self medicate to cope’, etc. What personal strengths do you possess that can help you at this time? Identify ways of thinking about your situation that support a realistic but optimistic, caring attitude towards yourself. After all, you have survived so far and taken care of yourself, so you have a track record of – at least to some extent – being able to land on your feet.

If you recognize any ‘weak’ areas within yourself, make a plan to develop more resilience. For example, if you lack confidence, you need to deliberately foster more faith in yourself. Start by focusing on your strengths - the ‘proof’ that you are at least adequate.

Identify - Do you need to acquire more stamina, or is it more a question of softening your attitude towards yourself? People who have been neglected or abused in childhood often have a built in Critic - aka the Judge - who attacks and undermines them reflexively. If you want to have a chance at overcoming anxiety or depression, then this Inner Critic needs to be identified and challenged repeatedly with positive, reality based thinking. You literally are what you believe about yourself. Make sure it’s the truth.

It may be helpful to talk about your pain and your strengths with a non-judgmental friend, support group or counsellor, who can see abilities that you minimize or don’t recognize in yourself. While determining the best solution for the particular emotional pain you are facing – as in Step 4 below - you can use these core strategies to stop most hurt from escalating:

1/ Relax Your Body To Free Your Mind

The first step when feeling distressed is to center your attention on relaxing your body, which signals to your mind that you are in a calm state and no threat is imminent. When this takes place, you can then begin to focus your mind and think your way through challenging situations. This is particularly important when dealing with stress and anxiety.

Research has shown that shallow breathing from the throat or chest causes the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline to escalate. Fortunately slow diaphragm – aka belly - breathing can lower your stress hormone levels to normal within 5 minutes. Meditation is also an excellent complement to proper breathing techniques.

2/ Stop the Thoughts that are Triggering Negative Feelings - Stand Up to the Inner Critic

a/ Remember who you are – your strengths – when not in the grip of dark thoughts and emotions

If negative thoughts are making you feel depressed or anxious, you must interrupt the process. Take a few minutes away from activities or other people. Become clear about what you are thinking. Dig deeper and discover the beliefs that are fueling pessimistic thinking. This is the realm of the Inner Critic. For example, you find yourself thinking “There’s no way I can get that job done on time”, and you notice that your mood is low. By focusing on the thought, you may recognize that the belief behind it is something like “I’m not competent, etc.” Then ask yourself what evidence supports that belief. Are there exceptions to that belief, when you know you are at least good enough? Look for proof that counters what the negative belief is trying to convince you of – i.e. that you can’t cope, are inadequate, are unlovable, etc. Write this down. Recording positive evidence about yourself helps make those traits feel more concrete and real, enabling you to believe in yourself more. This in turn promotes rational thinking and a more balanced, accurate view of yourself. Challenge negative expectations and beliefs with the truth about who you really are.

Destructive beliefs of this sort are distortions of who you are, and completely biased towards the negative, which means they are – at least to some extent - untrue. The Inner Critic usually has its roots in childhood abuse or neglect, where a child comes to believe the way that caretakers make her or him feel - i.e. bad. This can become a serious lifelong problem, when negative beliefs become unconscious, and are viewed as the truth

After confronting the Inner Critic’s agenda, you can also ask yourself “What’s the worst that can happen if the belief is in any way true?” On the rare occasion that it’s mostly bad

news, take steps to solve the problem, such as going for counselling, improving your social or work-related skills, focusing on healthy and balanced self care, etc.

b/ Be Kind To Your Feelings

The purpose of your emotions is to help you understand your needs and are the source of motivation. Emotions let you know whether something you are experiencing is good, neutral or bad. If you are aware of your emotions, you can then make informed decisions about whether to continue with your current train of thought or situation, or to change one or both of them to feel better.

In order to understand and accept ourselves, we must allow ourselves to feel our emotions, rather than trying to avoid or change them. This can be challenging if you have been taught to be fearful of your feelings, worry that your emotions are not acceptable, or could lead to rejection by others, putting you at risk for more hurt. Fear of emotions can lead you to repress or 'avoid' them, but it can be a powerful experience 'rediscovering' your feelings - and your deepest needs - and learning how to work with them in a constructive manner.

Emotions are not always recognizable as concrete feelings such as sadness or fear. They may first appear as physical sensations, such as a knot in the stomach or a tension headache. Pay attention to your physical cues and try to discover the emotion behind them. Be on the lookout for the Inner Critic, especially when upset. Many people still carrying pain from the past grew up in families where they did not receive support when distressed, and may have been judged or punished for feeling troubled. Those messages have become internalized if you find yourself automatically being judgmental of your sadness, worry or other forms of personal distress, or even happiness.

Practice standing up to this 'Inner Critic' by treating yourself with non-judgemental compassion if you are in pain. Ask yourself how others would want to be treated when upset, and take your own advice. Remind yourself that even though you may have been treated insensitively or harshly in the past, that you don't have to do this to yourself now, nor do you deserve it. Instead, remind yourself that you have the right to be treated with the kindness and caring that was denied you earlier in life. This can take a lot of practice, both learning how to be kind to yourself, and accepting treating yourself fairly. However it's central to developing a healing mindset that you become accustomed to dealing with yourself with more fairness, empathy and truth.

c/ Mind Your Business

Be conscious about the actions you take and the company you keep. If you are in a

situation that triggers anxiety, low mood or addictive behavior, ask yourself what your best choice is. In other words, do you need learn how to cope better or to avoid this situation in future? If you spend any time with people who make you feel bad about yourself, then try and sort through whether you need to become more assertive or would be better off minimizing contact. Again this is an example of finding the right solution to deal constructively with the particular problem you are facing.

d/ Externalize Your Negative Thoughts and Emotions, But Don't Dwell On Them

An important piece of wisdom in psychological circles is that 'what you focus on gets amplified'. According to this idea, learning to hone in on positive, realistic beliefs makes them stronger. Positive thinking in turn produces more optimistic emotions, which is key to any psychological recovery process, and the foundation for good mental health. This can be challenging if the Inner Critic is calling the shots, drawing your thoughts back to painful beliefs and emotions.

Write down your negative thoughts and feelings. Then focus on what you can do to improve the situation. Write down your vision of what you want life to look like when you no longer have these problems. Then set some goals to achieve your vision. Break the goals down to realistic, small daily steps to get there. Keep track of your progress. Use a journal to record what you are doing **right** on a daily basis, no matter how small it seems. Do not journal negative thoughts or feelings.

e/ Focus On Balanced Self Care

Take an honest look at the big picture of your life. What needs better balance or prioritizing: diet, sleep, work, exercise, socializing, play? Your psychological well being is dependent on taking care of your whole self. Make a commitment to attend to those areas of your life that you have been neglecting, and come up with a plan that can make those improvements a reality. If you feel stuck a skilled counsellor can help you come up with the components of a plan, and help you figure out the steps to get there.

How Counselling Can Help

Counselling can help you see the big picture of life's emotional challenges, and the connection between your psychological well being, your physical health and the quality of your relationships. Developing this perspective will enable you to identify problem areas, and find the right solutions for you that will improve your life.

Counselling can not only help you hone in on where you need help, but can also highlight your existing strengths, that you can build on to feel better faster. Another

important role of counselling is to support you in identifying and implementing strategies that will lead you to the happiness and peace of mind you want and deserve.

Step 4/ Take the Right Approach When Dealing with Unique Emotional Challenges

a/ Anxiety & the Inner Critic

I think of Anxiety as a “fast forward emotion”. Anxiety makes your mind race and worry about the future. It causes you to believe that you are not going to be able to deal with the demands of life and that, ultimately, you will fail. The Inner Critic - aka the Judge - almost always plays a big role here, convincing you that you can't cope, are not good enough, destined to crash, etc. In other words, it's negative beliefs that cause anxiety. Anxiety also disconnects us from our feelings, leading us to a helpless state of not knowing what we really want or truly need.

The challenge here is to redirect your focus to living in the moment from a place of calm and confidence. This will require repeatedly standing up to the Inner Critic.

Taking a 'stepwise' approach can be very helpful for breaking free of the overwhelm that's at the heart of anxiety. The first step is to identify the early warning signs of anxiety that often show up as physical discomfort such as a shallow breathing, muscular tension and/or headache. Early warning signs can also manifest as fear based thinking – for example, “I can't deal with this... person, relationship, job, situation, etc. I just know I'm going to... blow it, have a panic attack, do poorly, be humiliated, etc.”. The important thing is to become familiar with your own unique early warning signs and to take action, as it is much easier to defeat anxiety before it becomes full blown.

When you first become aware of your own unique early warning signs of anxiety, stop what you are doing for a few minutes. Decide whether the situation you are in is good for you, and if it is not leave if you can. If the situation is neutral or non-threatening but you feel anxious anyway, focus on calming your nervous system first. Take a break away from your desk, dinner table or other social environments, even if the washroom is the only private place you can go. Start with slow breathing from your diaphragm (i.e. belly), to the count of 10 for each inhalation-exhalation cycle. On your in breath, allow your belly to rise like a balloon filling up with air, and on your out breath, just relax your belly, releasing the air. Place your hand on your diaphragm so you can feel your belly expand and contract as you breathe in and out. When you breathe in you can say to yourself “Breathing in relaxation”, and when you breath out “Releasing tension”. After a few minutes your stress hormones will usually go down to normal, making it possible to think more rationally.

When you are feeling calmer, identify the situational trigger for anxiety, i.e. a memory, place, interaction, etc., and the cognitive process that accompanies it. This is often a belief, or series of deep seated beliefs that promote worry thinking, e.g. “I just haven’t got what it takes to do this job, I know I’m going to get fired”; “I know he will leave me when he finally sees what a loser I am”. Often these beliefs are subconscious, chipping away at your self worth under the surface. Identifying these negative beliefs is the second step to eliminating anxiety.

Next evaluate your beliefs – How true is that fear-based thinking? Is there any evidence to the contrary or exceptions to it? Is the problem a reflection of some weakness in yourself (usually not) or the way you see yourself? If it’s a weakness in yourself, figure out what you can do to improve your situation, e.g. develop your self confidence, or get more skills training. If you are being harshly critical of yourself, see 3 b/ “Be Kind To Your Feelings”.

If fear is holding you back from taking the action you desire, break it down into steps, and start by taking the least threatening step. Taking this approach is easier because if the small step doesn’t work out, there’s little at stake. You can then back up and start with an easier step. Most people who use this strategy and break things down into realistic steps don’t have to back track that often. For example, you are dating someone new whom you like and are worried about being rejected if you tell them how you feel. You could say something like “ I enjoy spending time with you” as an opener. If they respond positively, you could then say at a later time “ I enjoy spending time with you, and hope we can see each other more frequently, etc.”

When dealing with fear based thinking that is not founded on any provable weakness about your character or any real threat, it is also helpful to practice ‘negative thought stopping’ and ‘positive thought substitution’. Your overall goal is to stop overwhelm through calming your body, nervous system and mind so you can formulate realistic, positive beliefs about your life, think rationally and take effective action.

b/ Depression

Much like anxiety, depression is fuelled by negative beliefs, followed by pessimistic thinking and low mood. Unlike anxiety however, depression is more backward looking, propelling you to live your life ‘gazing’ in the rear view mirror. Depression keeps you stuck, dwelling on past problems and regrets, and viewing those experiences as evidence that your life will not improve, making you feel gloomy about the future. Depression has a vocabulary and perspective that can convince you that your situation is hopeless, can only get worse, and that you may as well give up – potentially plunging you into helplessness if you come to believe that nothing you do will make any difference

in improving your happiness. Depression tends to be both a physical and psychological experience that saps vital energy. Depressed people often experience fatigue and problems with sleeping and eating, in addition to low mood, potentially creating a vicious circle of exhaustion and defeat.

As with anxiety, the key to overcoming depression is to be on the lookout for the early warning signs of depression, especially self-critical and pessimistic beliefs that lead to feeling hopeless or helpless. Learning to identify and challenge thoughts and beliefs that reinforce negativity is key to preventing depression from gaining a foothold. (See the “Anxiety” section above for specific steps for overcoming negative beliefs).

Use Reverse Motivation to Overcome Depression

Many depressed people make the mistake of waiting to feel motivated before taking effective action in the face of depression. You need to know that you are setting yourself up for failure if you wait to feel motivated while depressed. In fact, you might need to act counter-intuitively at times. For example, you may have heard that exercise is effective in treating depression, but you wait until you have more energy before getting started, which is not going to happen when you are in the grip of depression. It's usually more effective to work backwards, specifically, to make yourself exercise, then see how you feel afterwards, and use the memory of the ‘afterglow’ of accomplishment to motivate and encourage you in the future.

People who take this approach often notice that they feel better after taking action, such as exercising, as it boosts their mood and gives them a sense of increased confidence. For any activity that you want to undertake but feel mired down in a low mood state, first focus on how you want to feel during and by the end of that particular activity. Let the goal of feeling better *in the future, whether it's 30 minutes or 30 days from now*, become your motivation for continuing to make this effort. As depression starts to wane you will feel more motivated, and have some positive habits established to feel good about at the same time.

c/ Trauma & Complex PTSD

Trauma is a complicated form of anxiety that gets locked or frozen in our bodies and our minds. It's a response to events that are so overwhelming that the mind cannot cope and attempts to bury or split off into the subconscious. This is a creative solution that unfortunately doesn't work as ‘buried’ or repressed traumatic memories can't heal, and continue resurface in response to triggers in the present, such as stress or situations that are in some way reminiscent of the original trauma, e.g. an interaction, a place, a person, a belief, a feeling, an odor, a sound, etc.

When a trauma is ongoing, as in childhood mistreatment or an abusive relationship, the

sufferer can become a ‘captive’ of trauma. This can lead to Complex PTSD, a post traumatic stress disorder characterized by feelings of abandonment anxiety, worthlessness, helplessness, and identity confusion. Relationships are often the biggest triggers of C-PTSD, due to abandonment and betrayal by principal caregivers in childhood, making it challenging for people with C-PTSD to trust others, and generally feel safe in intimate relationships.

The early warning signs of trauma can include feeling numb or blank, disconnected from others or your physical surroundings, intense fear, revulsion, or as though you are living in the past. Traumatic memories may appear as Flashbacks, where you feel like you are living the trauma all over again, though the original threat is over. Flashbacks tend to generate intense fear and disorientation, which may or may not be accompanied by memories, feelings or sensations of the original trauma. This can occur while awake or dreaming, where flashbacks show up as nightmares.

Traumatic memories can cause Dissociation, which can range from feeling dazed, ‘spaced out’ or disconnected from one’s surroundings, to feeling flooded or overwhelmed by emotion. When trauma is re-triggered it can lead to a Fight, Flight, Freeze, Collapse or Fawning response, which are neurologically wired reactions to life threatening situations, such as jumping out of the way of a car. Unfortunately traumatic memory doesn’t know how to distinguish between a past threat and current safety, so the sufferer re-experiences frightening intrusive memory signals – conscious or unconscious - that feel like the original trauma is happening all over again.

Trauma can also cause serious relationship problems including “Repetition Compulsion”, whereby traumatized people keep choosing unreliable or abusive intimate partners who are similar to their original abuser who traumatized them.

For example, a girl who was beaten and demeaned by her father goes on to choose abusive men as her romantic partners as an adult. The ‘devil you know’ feels familiar and somehow appropriate, but will keep her trapped in unhealed trauma, and re-injured all over again as she continues to be abused.

Although recurring trauma symptoms are most effectively dealt with in psychotherapy with a skilled counsellor, there are also grounding strategies you can adopt to help you feel calmer and more present. When you detect the early warning signs that a traumatic reaction has been triggered, breathe slowly and focus on the here and now. Notice the details of the room or space you are in, colors, shapes, furniture, buildings, etc. Feel your feet touching the ground. Put your hand on a wall, etc.

Remind yourself that you are living in the present, and can no longer be harmed like you were during the original trauma. Remember that you are safe now and that the threatening events of the past are over. Tell yourself the truth, that you are a strong adult

who has survived and taken care of yourself for many years. After you are feeling calmer, identify the traumatic trigger(s) and where possible and healthy, work to reduce, avoid or eliminate them in future.

If you choose to see a therapist, she will help you resolve traumatic responses by gaining mastery over them. Trauma therapy will teach you how to stop traumatic responses in their tracks by 1/ increasing a sense of personal safety, 2/ becoming less reactive to present and future trauma triggers through calming one's body and mind, 3/ gradually facing some traumatic memories while effectively neutralizing them at the same time. Techniques that are used to overcome panic and phobias, such as Hypnosis and Progressive Desensitization – where relaxation responses are paired with traumatic memories to reduce their negative impact - can be very helpful in overcoming trauma responses.

d/ Chronic Grief

Although grief is a normal and necessary response to any significant loss, the process can get 'stuck' if the grieving person is having trouble accepting or adjusting to the loss. This can particularly be the case where loss has been sudden, traumatic or death is involved.

Experiences that most commonly cause traumatic grief are witnessing a death; violent or accidental death; discovering the deceased's body and/or your life was threatened as well. If frightening images are frequently running through your mind, rather than easier memories and feelings towards the person you have lost, you may be suffering from traumatic grief.

Chronic grief can arise as well in response to unresolved childhood abuse issues. It may also be triggered by present day situations such as the loss of an important relationship or job. Some of the main factors leading to this reaction include: earlier similar loss(es) such as abandonment, neglect or abuse; the meaning of the loss to the individual; a history of depression and/or anxiety, lack of support, and multiple losses throughout life.

Early warning signs of chronic grief include the intensification of grief symptoms after 6 to 12 months. Other symptoms are disbelief or denial of the loss, intrusive thoughts, rage, avoiding places or people that are reminders of the loss, major depression, intense longing for the lost loved one or situation, feelings of overwhelming sadness and hopelessness, and believing life is over.

If more than 6 months have gone by and your grief symptoms appear to be getting worse it's time to get some professional help, as self-help strategies are unlikely to be effective once grief has escalated to this point. Therapy can help you 1/ overcome

negative and/or fear based beliefs that are keeping you locked in chronic grief, and 2/ to resolve any trauma symptoms. Counselling can help you regain emotional control by helping you learn how to **voluntarily** face your loss or step away from loss at will, thereby re-establishing a healthy emotional balance.

Chronic grief counselling techniques draw from a variety of approaches used to overcome anxiety, depression and trauma

e/ Addictive Behaviors

Dealing effectively with addictive behavior requires a multi-faceted approach. The first step is to understand the 'why'. Why are you are engaging in this behavior, i.e. what problem you are attempting to solve? By doing this you will discover the legitimate need behind the compulsive behavior. For example, you drink because you want to feel less anxious. Or you lose yourself in an unsatisfying relationship in order to not feel empty or unlovable. Next, identify what you want to gain by stopping addiction, i.e. the benefits of hitting the brake. Usually the need is to feel better emotionally and/or have more positive relationships and social supports.

The challenge is to learn how to meet your needs by finding the right solution to the problem. That's where confidence will come from. If you have problems with anxiety, then you need to take steps to learn how to overcome the problem directly, effectively and constructively. (See strategies for overcoming anxiety above).

Addiction recovery also involves learning how to stand up to 'Addictive Thinking' – the lies that try to convince you that you need to engage in compulsive behavior in order to be OK. For example, "I can't deal with this anxiety unless I have a drink". In that case, the solution is to learn how to deal effectively - and healthily - with anxiety.

You also need to be honest with yourself that addictive behavior has never solved the problem, but only dulled the pain or distracted you for a few hours until the problem was back again and possibly worse for having indulged the addiction. You will also have to become skilled at identifying and avoiding high risk triggers and dealing with cravings. Dealing constructively with psychological problems such as anxiety, trauma, depression or chronic grief is essential for healing to take place. Recovery often requires significant lifestyle changes, including the people you associate with, the places you spend your time, and how you take care of yourself.

The early warning signs of relapsing back to addictive behavior include giving in to addictive thinking, such as believing you have to anesthetize/self medicate your feelings or thoughts with drugs, alcohol or compulsive behaviors, such as relationship addiction, codependency, gambling, binge eating, etc. in order to cope. Another sign of relapse can be exposing yourself to high risk triggers and not having a backup plan, e.g. being

around difficult people, challenging places (e.g. a bar), and/or not taking care of yourself (sleep, diet, etc). You need to have a solid recovery plan in place to stop the addictive behavior and to minimize the risk of relapse. Addiction recovery therapy, with a skilled counsellor, can help you develop a solid recovery plan, so you can then work through the emotional challenges that led you into addictive behavior in the first place.

10/ Relationships

Anxiety, depression, trauma, grief or addictive behaviors often lead to strained relationships between ourselves and those we love or work with. In fact, most people struggling with ongoing psychological distress notice their relationships are negatively impacted to some extent. Many people find it difficult to communicate their pain due to fear of rejection, embarrassment or shame. Unfortunately this can lead to more problems such as conflict, distancing or chronic frustration in the relationship.

Sometimes staying silent about the problem is an indicator that all is not well in the relationship, as trust and support are missing. As people recover from emotional challenges, decisions need to be made about how to make relationships healthier and more resilient. This may require letting some relationships go. At the very least, most relationships will need to be rebuilt on a stronger foundation.

The key task in rebuilding relationships while rebounding from emotional distress or addiction is to improve communication, including strengthening trust, resolving conflict constructively, and establishing healthy boundaries.

a/ Healthy Communication in Relationships

Positive communication is the cornerstone of any healthy relationship. But what you choose to share with your loved ones about your problems should depend on the nature of the relationship. For example, what you tell your partner will be different than what you communicate to your children or parents. Ideally your partner should be your closest ally, who can be there for you during the ups and downs. That being said, it is not fair to lean on your partner excessively, as this can be overwhelming for them and the relationship. It's important to find other supportive allies in your community with whom to partner during your healing journey. If your relationship with your partner has deteriorated, or there is a lot of anger, it can be very beneficial to consult with a trained couple's counsellor to help rebuild trust and intimacy.

A good guideline for communicating with close friends, family members or loved ones is to only share what's helpful for you and the relationship. If you are not sure where to begin, you can start by revealing a little bit about your situation – something low risk – and see how they respond. If the response is positive, then you can reveal something deeper or more private. Continue to disclose according to how comfortable you feel and

how constructive the reaction is from the person you are sharing with.

If you have young children it's a delicate balance between letting them know - in general - that you haven't been feeling well, and reassuring them that you are working on getting better. Children pick up on the emotional tone in the family and know there is something wrong. They need a limited amount of age appropriate honesty and, more importantly, reassurance that they are safe and secure in your care in the long run.

Communicating with others should be based on the quality of the relationship. For example, if you have a loving relationship with your parents it makes sense to reveal more details than if your parents are critical or unsupportive. You need to exercise your judgment in deciding the depth to which you share your struggles. If you are unsure about how to do this, or relationships are strained, consult a counsellor to help you.

How Counselling Can Help

Counselling can help you get really clear about how to transcend the specific problems you are facing, whether it's anxiety, stress, trauma, sadness, grief, low self worth, or a combination of factors. Each challenge requires unique solutions for you to get on track. A skilled counsellor will help you find the right strategies for overcoming emotional challenges that take into account your life history, complement your personality, and provide support and guidance along the way.

Step 5/ Gain Perspective and Live Your Life Fully Today

Overcoming anxiety, depression, trauma, grief or addictive behaviors - and the 'Inner Critic' - takes an investment of time and patience. These patterns have become ingrained, possibly for decades, and it will take a while to unlearn them. If positive results are slower coming than you'd hoped, it's important to remember why you are making changes – to have a better life in the long run. Healing is not always a linear process. It takes a trial and error approach. Life can get bumpy temporarily. Sometimes change feels uncomfortable because it's unfamiliar. But that doesn't mean that change is wrong. You need to give yourself time to adjust to feeling better and living well.

At the beginning of your healing journey you may have to continually stand up to your 'Inner Critic' - challenging beliefs that you don't deserve to feel better, or that you are flawed or unlovable. Occasionally others will object when they see you getting better, as it requires them to examine their world view or relationship with you. This can feel discouraging. The bottom line though is that relationships that are worth holding onto are relationships where both parties have the other's best interests at heart. You may have to end – or take a break from - relationships that are unhealthy and not currently open to

change.

Once you have made the decision to deal with emotional challenges in a healthy way, give yourself credit and focus on cultivating a relaxed attitude. Recognize that this is a milestone in your healing process. Build a support system of loved ones, friends and community allies, such as a good counsellor, who will help you reach your goal of living the life you want to have, free of distress and full of peace and contentment.

Summing Up - How Counselling Can Help Heal the ‘Pain That Won’t Go Away’ and Dispatch the Dreaded Inner Critic

Counselling can be a solid support to emotional healing in the following ways:

1. Improving your ability to recognize and understand the type of pain you are struggling with – where it comes from, and how it shows up now, so you know what you are dealing with, and when you need to take action to regain control.
2. Becoming intimately familiar with your Early Warning Signs of distress and emotional Triggers, so you can take steps to stop the pain from escalating.
3. Understanding the mind-body connection better, so you can identify where you need to focus first to overcome chronic emotional pain, and develop relevant goals and plans to help you feel better faster.
4. Targeting the specific problems you are dealing with – whether stress, relationship problems, sadness, anxiety, grief, low self esteem, or addictive behaviors - and applying effective strategies that enable you to recover from long standing emotional challenges.
5. Learning to identify and stand up to the Inner Critic by unearthing and challenging beliefs that contribute to anxiety, depression and self doubt, and replacing these negative beliefs with more affirming truths.
6. Eliminating anxiety so that your emotions can be accessed in the moment, helping you to get in touch with your needs and motivation, so you can say ‘Yes’ to yourself, and ‘No’ to what hurts you.

Need help overcoming the pain that won't go away?

If you are struggling with chronic stress, anxiety, relationship problems, family scapegoating, grief, trauma, low self esteem or addictive behavior - and don't know what to do - then I invite you to contact me to [Request an Appointment](#)

When you Request an Appointment we can briefly discuss the challenges you are facing and how my counselling services can help you overcome the pain and finally feel at peace in your life.

Glynis Sherwood - MEd, Canadian Certified Counsellor, Registered Clinical Counsellor (BC), Certified Couples Therapist, Certified Addictions Counsellor and Certified Hypnotherapist is a Psychotherapist specializing in recovery from chronic emotional distress and relationship challenges. Services are available by Video worldwide.

I look forward to hearing from you and helping you achieve the life you want and deserve!

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