

Embodying Hope



Celebrate Small Steps

Acute trauma forces sudden, overwhelming, drastic change on the body. It is natural to expect that some equally drastic treatment can undo the change and restore health. Chronic trauma can be an accumulation of sudden blows, or a long-term lack of essential nurturing and care.

Unlike trauma, healing is slow, gentle, and incremental. Healing from chronic trauma might include learning new skills that were missing in childhood, which is also a slow process. We learn to relate to ourselves more kindly, even though the effects of trauma are not erased.

Pause for relief. One of my jobs as a practitioner is to hold a sense of progress for my clients, both within a session and over the time we work together. Within a session, we pause together to notice a shoulder that is more relaxed, a deep breath of relief, or the “cheering section” of belly gurgles. We take note of a more hopeful thought about an issue, or a new idea that floats up.

In our daily lives, each of us can take time to soak up relief, hope, and ease when they arise. Our bodies like to spend more time at ease. We naturally do more of what feels good, so we reinforce positive patterns when we give our attention to enjoyment.

Acknowledge successes. Over the long term, a client’s nervous system settles more quickly during a session, and they bring in stories of successes that would not have been possible in the past. Our work together gradually shifts as

old issues are resolved and new issues come to the fore. We all tend to forget about what stops bothering us or what we completed, turning our focus toward new goals just out of reach. How does it feel in your body to pause and acknowledge a recent success or shift?

Some clients deflect positive words. They might fear being set up for ridicule if they dare own their success, or feel that “boasting” is not allowed, or worry that something bad will happen if they let down their guard. They might want to ensure that their negative feelings are not erased. Those responses make sense after coming through difficult experiences.

Uneven progress. Healing from trauma has its ups and downs. When a client falls in an emotional hole, it can be an opportunity to notice how much they have improved overall. “Remember when you used to feel like this all the time?” It can also be a chance to notice how much more quickly they return to balance than they did in the past.

One clear sign of progress in healing from trauma is decoupling present triggers from past strong reactions. For example, at first a client might respond with frozen terror when the sheet touches their neck. Later in their healing, they might be able to say, “I don’t like that,” and move the sheet away. It is still an uncomfortable sensation, but does not kindle an overwhelming nervous system reaction.

Slow change. While we might occasionally notice a big shift, most change happens one small tentative step at a time. We might need to experience a new possibility many times before it overrides an existing pattern. Bodies prefer to have time to adapt to change.

We can also celebrate small actions we take in the direction of healing, or any large goal. As a gift to your future self,

take a tiny step forward now, so that the next tiny step will be possible tomorrow. Valuing only larger steps can block progress entirely.

Allow stuckness. Progress and improvement are wonderful to see, and at the same time, clients do not have to improve for the practitioner's benefit. Some clients find it helpful or supportive to continue to come in even when we do not see a lot of change. Sometimes bodies rest for a while to gather strength for the next change. Sometimes depression or stuckness lasts a long time. We do not have to improve to deserve care through hard times.

Chronic illness and disability can be opportunities to notice a different kind of progress. Perhaps we are better able to honor our limits or find helpful care. With defeat, failure, or downturns, perhaps we can be more gentle and less self-critical than in the past. Perhaps we can go through a recurring pattern with awareness, even if we cannot yet change it.

Practice feeling better. One of the main goals of healing is to feel better. We can work directly on that goal by bringing our attention to anything that feels better, and staying with the pleasant feelings for as long as feels right to us. Celebrate each small improvement. You deserve recognition for the hard work and learning and letting go that made it possible.