

**“Although the world is full
of suffering, it is full also
of the overcoming of it.”**

—Helen Keller
(20th-century American writer)

Safety Is the Most Important Priority Right Now!

This entire treatment revolves around one central idea: *You need to stay safe*. The good news is that you can learn to cope safely, no matter what negative life events come your way. Nothing has to make you use substances or engage in any other high-risk behavior.

EXAMPLES

Life situation. You lose your job; your mother criticizes you; you wake up depressed; someone offers you cocaine; your dog dies; you dissociate; your partner gives you a hard time; you have no money; you find out you have a tumor; you have a flashback; you can't sleep.

Your coping. This is everything! *No matter what happens* in your life, you can cope safely.

<i>Unsafe Coping</i>	<i>versus</i>	<i>Safe Coping</i>
Use substances	versus	Ask for help
Hurt yourself (e.g., cutting, burning)	versus	Take good care of your body
Let someone harm you	versus	Set a boundary in a relationship
Act on impulse	versus	Rethink the situation

The goal of this treatment is to help you become more aware of how you are coping and to teach you how to cope more safely. That's it!

STAGES OF HEALING FROM PTSD AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

For both PTSD and substance abuse, *safety* is the first stage in healing, according to a great deal of research and clinical wisdom. The stages are as follows:

1. **Safety.** This is the phase you are in now. The goals are to free yourself from substance abuse, stay alive, build healthy relationships, gain control over your feelings, learn to cope with day-to-day problems, protect yourself from destructive people and situations, not hurt yourself or others, increase your functioning, and attain stability.

2. **Mourning.** Once you are more safe, you may need to grieve about the past—about what your trauma and substance abuse did to you. You may need to cry deeply to get over the losses and pain you experienced: loss of innocence, loss of trust, loss of time.

3. **Reconnection.** After letting yourself experience mourning, you will find yourself more willing and able to reconnect with the world in joyful ways: thriving, enjoying life, able to work and relate well to others. You *will* get to this stage if you can establish safety now!

(cont.)

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It is important to know that *you can heal from PTSD and substance abuse*; many people do. It does not mean that you forget about the past. Rather, it means that it no longer holds such destructive power over your life. (Note that some people use the term “recovery”; others do not like to use it for PTSD, substance abuse, or both. Whatever wording you prefer is okay.)

SIGNS OF RECOVERY












“Recovery” means that you . . .

- * Can talk about the trauma without feeling either very upset or numb.
- * Can function well in daily life (such as holding a job).
- * Are safe (e.g., not suicidal or abusing substances).
- * Are able to be in healthy relationships without feeling completely vulnerable or isolated.
- * Are able to take pleasure in life.
- * Take good care of your body (e.g., eating, sleeping, exercising).
- * Can rely on yourself and others.
- * Can control your most overwhelming symptoms.
- * Believe that you deserve to take good care of yourself.
- * Have confidence that you can protect yourself.

WHAT IS SAFETY TO YOU?



Describe what safety means to you. Write out *who* you feel safe with, *what* activities you feel safe doing, and *where* you feel safe. You might also want to describe in detail a safe place that helps you feel calm and connected, such as a room, the beach, your therapist’s office, or another place that brings you back to a feeling of inner peace. You can add drawings, quotations, or anything else that you like, to better express what safety is for you. Continue on the back of this page if you need more space.

Safe Coping Skills

 Ask for help	Reach out to someone safe
 Inspire yourself	Carry something positive (e.g., poem), or negative (e.g., photo of friend who overdosed)
 Leave a bad scene	When things go wrong, get out
 Persist	Never, never, never, never, never, never, never, <i>never</i> give up
 Honesty	Secrets and lying are at the core of PTSD and substance abuse; honesty heals them
 Cry	Let yourself cry; it will not last forever
 Choose self-respect	Choose whatever will make you like yourself tomorrow
 Take good care of your body	Healthy eating, exercise, safe sex
 List your options	In any situation, you have choices
 Create meaning	Remind yourself what you are living for: your children? love? truth? justice? God?
 Do the best you can with what you have	Make the most of available opportunities
 Set a boundary	Say “no” to protect yourself
 Compassion	Listen to yourself with respect and care
 When in doubt, do what’s hardest	The most difficult path is invariably the right one

(cont.)

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 Talk yourself through it	Self-talk helps in difficult times
 Imagine	Create a mental picture that helps you to feel different (e.g., remember a safe place)
 Notice the choice point	In slow motion, notice the exact moment when you chose a substance
 Pace yourself	If overwhelmed, go slower; if stagnant, go faster
 Stay safe	Do whatever you need to do to put your safety above all
 Seek understanding, not blame	<i>Listen</i> to your behavior; blaming prevents growth
 If one way doesn't work, try another	As if in a maze, turn a corner and try a new path
 Link PTSD and substance abuse	Recognize substances as an attempt to <i>self-medicate</i>
 Alone is better than a bad relationship	If only treaters are safe for now, that's okay
 Create a new story	You are the author of your life: be the hero who overcomes adversity
 Avoid avoidable suffering	Prevent bad situations in advance
 Ask others	Ask others if your belief is accurate
 Get organized	You'll feel more in control with "to-do" lists and a clean house
 Watch for danger signs	Face a problem before it becomes huge; notice <i>red flags</i>
 Healing above all	Focus on what matters
















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☞ Try something, anything	A good plan today is better than a perfect one tomorrow
☞ Discovery	Find out whether your assumption is true, rather than staying “in your head”
☞ Attend treatment	AA, self-help, therapy, medications, groups—anything that keeps you going
☞ Create a buffer	Put something between you and danger (e.g., time, distance)
☞ Say what you really think	You’ll feel closer to others (but only do this with safe people)
☞ Listen to your needs	No more neglect—really hear what you need
☞ Move toward your opposite	For example, if you are too dependent, try being more independent
☞ Replay the scene	Review a negative event: What can you do differently next time?
☞ Notice the cost	What is the price of substance abuse in your life?
☞ Structure your day	A productive schedule keeps you on track and connected to the world
☞ Set an <i>action plan</i>	Be specific, set a deadline, and let others know about it
☞ Protect yourself	Put up a shield against destructive people, bad environments, and substances
☞ Soothing talk	Talk to yourself very gently (as if to a friend or small child)
☞ Think of the consequences	<i>Really</i> see the impact for tomorrow, next week, next year
☞ Trust the process	Just keep moving forward; the only way out is through





(cont.)

 Work the material	The more you practice and participate, the quicker the healing
 Integrate the split self	Accept all sides of yourself; they are there for a reason
 Expect growth to feel uncomfortable	If it feels awkward or difficult, you're doing it right
 Replace destructive activities	Eat candy instead of getting high
 Pretend you like yourself	See how different the day feels
 Focus on now	Do what you can to make today better; don't get overwhelmed by the past or future
 Praise yourself	Notice what you did right; this is the most powerful method of growth
 Observe repeating patterns	Try to notice and understand your reenactments
 Self-nurture	Do something that you enjoy (e.g., take a walk, see a movie)
 Practice delay	If you can't totally prevent a self-destructive act, at least delay it as long as possible
 Let go of destructive relationships	If it can't be fixed, detach
 Take responsibility	Take an active, not a passive approach
 Set a deadline	Make it happen by setting a date
 Make a commitment	Promise yourself to do what's right to help your recovery
 Rethink	Think in a way that helps you feel better

(cont.)

 Detach from emotional pain (grounding)	Distract, walk away, change the channel
 Learn from experience	Seek wisdom that can help you next time
 Solve the problem	Don't take it personally when things go wrong—try just to seek a solution
 Use kinder language	Make your language less harsh
 Examine the evidence	Evaluate both sides of the picture
 Plan it out	Take the time to think ahead—it's the opposite of impulsivity
 Identify the belief	Examples: <i>shoulds</i> , <i>deprivation reasoning</i>
 Reward yourself	Find a healthy way to celebrate anything you do right
 Create new "tapes"	Literally! Take a tape recorder and record a new way of thinking to play back
 Find rules to live by	Remember a phrase that works for you (e.g., "Stay real")
 Setbacks are not failures	A setback is just a setback, nothing more
 Tolerate the feeling	"No feeling is final"; just get through it safely
 Actions first, and feelings will follow	Don't wait until you feel motivated; just start now
 Create positive addictions	Examples: sports, hobbies, AA . . .
 When in doubt, don't	If you suspect danger, stay away

(cont.)

 Fight the trigger	Take an <i>active</i> approach to protect yourself
 Notice the source	Before you accept criticism or advice, notice who's telling it to you
 Make a decision	If you're stuck, try choosing the best solution you can right now; don't wait
 Do the right thing	Do what you know will help you, even if you don't feel like it
 Go to a meeting	Feet first; just get there and let the rest happen
 Protect your body from HIV	This is <i>truly</i> a life-or-death issue
 Prioritize healing	Make healing your most urgent and important goal, above all else
 Reach for community resources	Lean on them! They can be a source of great support
 Get others to support your recovery	Tell people what you need
 Notice what you <i>can</i> control	List the aspects of your life you <i>do</i> control (e.g., job, friends . . .)

Acknowledgments: The "signs of recovery" in Handout 1 are based in part on Harvey (1990). Some of the safe coping skills in Handout 2 are from Marlatt and Gordon (1985) (e.g., "Setbacks are not failures" and "Create positive addictions"); some are related to AA (e.g., "Work the material" and "Go to a meeting"); "No feeling is final" is from Rilke (1996); and many are drawn from professional books and articles on cognitive-behavioral therapy and relapse prevention. Ask your therapist for guidance if you would like to locate any of these sources.

Ideas for a Commitment

Commit to one action that will move your life forward!

It can be anything you feel will help you, or you can try one of the ideas below.

Keeping your commitment is a way of respecting, honoring, and caring for yourself.

- ✦ Option 1: Go through the list of Safe Coping Skills, checking off (✓) the ones you already do, and putting a star (★) next to the ones you want to learn.
- ✦ Option 2: Start keeping a "journal of successes" (times that you coped safely, obstacles overcome, successes in resisting substance use, coping skills that you used).
- ✦ Option 3: Create an "inspiration book" or "inspiration box" to inspire you to stay safe (including photographs of people you love, songs, poems, quotations, news clippings, etc.).
- ✦ Option 4: Fold the list of Safe Coping Skills in half down the middle. Read the names of the skills on the left side and try to remember what each one means. Give yourself 1 point for each correct answer.
- ✦ Option 5: Write a paragraph on what "safety" means to you.
- ✦ Option 6: Try using one new skill this week from the list of Safe Coping Skills and write how it went.
- ✦ Option 7: Fill out the Safe Coping Sheet. (See below for an example applied to this topic.)

EXAMPLE OF THE SAFE COPING SHEET APPLIED TO THIS TOPIC

	Old Way	New Way
Situation	I got laid off from work.	I got laid off from work.
★ <u>Your Coping</u> ★	I feel like I can't cope—this is the last straw. I don't know what to do. I have money problems already, and this will put me under. I got high.	Say to myself, "If I stay safe, I can try to cope with this." I can: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call my brother to talk about it. • Talk to my counselor about how to get a new job. • Go to an AA meeting and be around people.
Consequence	Felt out of control, felt like a failure.	Able to stay safe without getting high; felt okay. Even though I'm still out of a job, I feel proud of having not buckled under the stress.

How safe is your old way of coping? _____ How safe is your new way of coping? _____

Rate from 0 (not at all safe) to 10 (totally safe)

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