

Chapter 6: Losing Your Body, Losing Your Self

Chapter 6: *Losing Your Body, Losing Your Self*, the journey of healing often begins with learning to live with the questions themselves, as Rainer Maria Rilke beautifully expressed in his letters to a young poet. Just as with the challenges in our emotional and psychological states, the answers to our struggles may come slowly, without our direct awareness. Instead, we might find our way toward understanding through the simple act of living with the discomfort of the questions.

Sherry walked into my office, her body language speaking volumes before she even uttered a word. Her slumped posture, with her chin almost touching her chest, told me that she was hiding from the world in more ways than one. When she began to speak, her voice was flat and monotone, revealing a deep emotional numbness that had taken root over the years.

Sherry's story was one of neglect and deep emotional scars that had been left unaddressed. Growing up in a foster home where she was surrounded by other children in need of care, Sherry had always felt like an outsider in her own family. She shared memories of her mother telling her that she didn't belong, that she was the "wrong baby," a comment that, though possibly meant as a joke, was laden with unspoken pain. This neglect wasn't just emotional—it affected her sense of self and place in the world, a painful reality that would continue to shape her well into adulthood.

The trauma of her childhood wasn't the only burden Sherry carried. Her adult life was marked by isolation, devoid of close relationships, and filled with painful reminders of her past. She described a terrifying incident in Florida during a college vacation where

she was abducted, held captive, and assaulted for days. Despite the horrifying nature of her experience, her mother, who she had turned to for help, rejected her plea for assistance, leaving Sherry with a profound sense of abandonment.

As Sherry's therapist, I came to realize that her struggles were not just psychological but deeply somatic. She exhibited behaviors like skin picking as a way to feel something, to regain a sense of control over her body when everything else felt out of her reach. This compulsive behavior, although harmful, wasn't an attempt at self-harm but rather an attempt to feel alive when everything else felt numb and distant.

Over time, I began to understand the connection between trauma and the disconnection from the body. For many people with histories of trauma, physical sensations become a foreign territory, disconnected from the mind. This disconnection isn't just a psychological issue but a somatic one, where the body's internal sensors fail to engage, leaving individuals feeling detached from themselves and their surroundings.

Research has shown that trauma, especially when experienced at a young age, affects how we process sensory information. Studies on individuals with PTSD reveal that their brains struggle to integrate sensory inputs, which are vital for developing a coherent sense of self. When this connection is disrupted, it becomes nearly impossible to feel in tune with one's body, leading to further emotional and physical issues.

Trauma affects our sense of "self" by interfering with the brain's ability to register bodily sensations, which are critical for our emotional well-being. Without this sensory feedback, individuals may feel as though they are disconnected from their own body, leading to feelings of being "invisible" or "unreal." This phenomenon is seen not only in Sherry but in many others with a history of neglect and abuse, where the lack of connection to their body becomes a core part of their suffering.

One of the most effective therapeutic interventions for these patients involves helping them reconnect with their body. This process, known as somatic therapy, focuses on bringing awareness to bodily sensations and re-establishing the connection between

the mind and body. As these individuals begin to feel more grounded in their physical experience, their emotional well-being often improves, as Sherry's case showed when she began massage therapy and became more open and engaged in her life.

The journey to healing requires acknowledging the body as a vital part of the self, as it holds the key to understanding and processing our emotions. Learning to listen to our body's signals is an essential step in overcoming trauma and regaining a sense of agency. When we are in tune with our physical sensations, we can begin to trust ourselves again and rebuild a sense of safety and control.

As we learn to interpret the signals our bodies give us, we gain a better understanding of how to care for ourselves and our emotional needs. This reconnection also helps individuals with trauma to navigate the world more confidently, without the constant fear of being overwhelmed by their internal state. The ability to recognize and manage our emotional and physical responses is crucial for long-term healing, and with the right therapeutic support, it is entirely possible to reclaim our sense of self from the grip of trauma.