

## **When Survival Becomes a Way of Life: Trauma-Informed Therapy for PTSD and Complex PTSD**

Living with the effects of trauma can sometimes feel like carrying a psychological burden that never seems to fully settle – where peace of mind feels like it's always out of reach, or perhaps something you've stopped believing is possible.

Even when danger has passed, the mind and body may continue responding as though safety remains uncertain: with persistent states of vigilance, exhaustion, emotional numbness, mistrust, overthinking, shame, emotional disconnection, people-pleasing, or difficulty relaxing and feeling safe.

While PTSD and Complex PTSD share many similarities, they often emerge from different kinds of experiences. PTSD is often connected to experiences that felt life-threatening, overwhelming, or emotionally impossible to fully process. Whereas Complex PTSD often emerges through prolonged emotional unsafety; chronic relational trauma, neglect, abuse, unpredictability, invalidation, attachment wounds, bullying, rejection, and coercion.



When a person has lived through overwhelming or chronically unsafe experiences, trauma can deeply shape emotional life, relationships, identity, and one's nervous system. Many of the coping mechanisms that people experience after trauma are not signs of weakness or personal failure. They often begin as attempts to adapt, protect, navigate, and survive under difficult circumstances.

Over time, these coping mechanisms can start to shape how we relate to ourselves, others, and the world around us:

**Hypervigilance:** A persistent state of heightened alertness in which the mind and body remain constantly prepared for danger, criticism, or emotional threat.

**Mistrust:** Difficulty feeling emotionally safe enough to rely on others due to past experiences of hurt, betrayal, unpredictability, or rejection.

**Perfectionism:** A survival-based belief that mistakes, vulnerability, or imperfection may lead to criticism, failure, shame, or loss of connection.

**Shame:** A deeply painful sense of believing there is something fundamentally wrong, inadequate, or unworthy about oneself.

**Dissociation:** A protective response in which a person feels emotionally disconnected from themselves, their surroundings, memories, or experiences.

**Difficulty resting:** A chronic sense of internal tension or unease that makes slowing down, relaxing, or feeling safe in stillness difficult.

**Emotional overfunctioning:** A pattern of taking excessive emotional responsibility for situations, relationships, or the well-being of others in order to maintain stability or safety.

**People-pleasing:** Prioritizing the needs, emotions, or approval of others while suppressing one's own needs in order to avoid conflict, rejection, or abandonment.

**Chronic anxiety:** An ongoing experience of worry, fear, nervous system activation, or emotional unease that can persist even in the absence of immediate danger.

**Loneliness:** A painful sense of emotional disconnection, isolation, or feeling unseen and misunderstood by others.

**Fear of vulnerability:** Difficulty allowing oneself to be emotionally open or authentic due to fear of rejection, judgment, betrayal, or emotional harm.

**Identity confusion:** A struggle to feel clear, grounded, or connected to one's sense of self, values, emotions, or personal identity.

**Relational exhaustion:** Emotional fatigue that develops from repeatedly navigating relationships that feel emotionally unsafe, one-sided, unpredictable, or draining.

**Emotional shutdown:** A protective response in which emotional expression, connection, or engagement becomes limited or inaccessible during stress or overwhelm.



Unresolved trauma can deeply influence relationships. Human beings are wired for connection, and when relationships become sources of pain, uncertainty, or harm, we often suffer deeply as a result.

Trauma-informed therapy with me begins with understanding that meaningful change happens through safety, trust, and developing a relationship with yourself that feels compassionate and less driven by survival. We work together at a pace that respects your experiences, your nervous system, and your readiness for change.

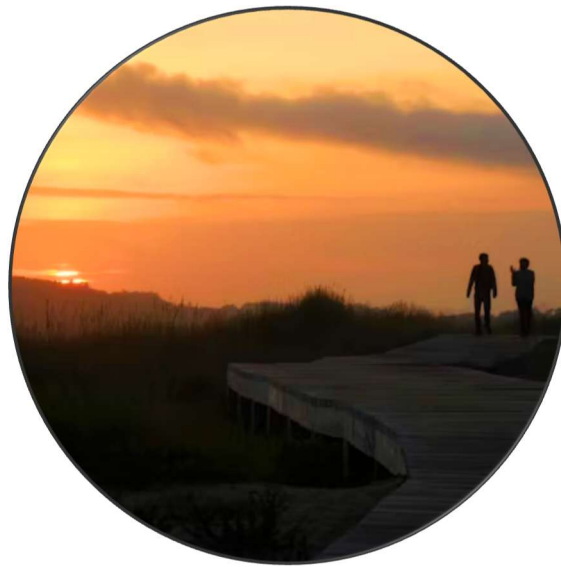
My understanding of trauma is informed not only by professional training and certification as a Certified Trauma Professional, but also by many years of personal experiences involving complicated grief, loss, and emotional survival.

These experiences continue to shape the way I sit with suffering, approach care, and understand the complexity of moving towards healing.

Many people are surprised by what healing from trauma actually looks like. Healing from trauma often does not mean never thinking about painful experiences again, or never experiencing overwhelming emotions, sensations, or memories.

More often, healing shows up in quieter ways -

With safety beginning to feel more like a lived reality than a distant hope; developing greater emotional flexibility; understanding yourself better; practicing regulating your nervous system; trusting yourself more; making connections with others again; experiencing less shame; allowing yourself to really lean into resting; and an ability to experience life more fully.



The psychological effects of trauma can convince you that the ways you learned to survive are simply who you are. Part of the work of therapy is gently exploring whether there may be more to you than the adaptations that helped you make it through difficult experiences.

If you are seeking support in moving beyond survival and toward healing, my hope is that what you've read leaves you with a reminder – *new beginnings are possible, and you are worthy of them.*

If what you've read resonates with you, I'd be glad to hear from you.

With a heart for service and care,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Antonio Siracusa', with a stylized, cursive script.

Antonio Siracusa, RP