

Judith Herman

TRAUMA THINKERS · RECOVERY, RELATIONSHIPS AND JUSTICE

Recovery as regaining power and connection

Judith Lewis Herman (born 1942) is an American psychiatrist whose work changed how many clinicians understand trauma, particularly the effects of abuse, violence and coercive control. Her writing places survivors' experiences, relationships and dignity at the centre of recovery.

WHAT TRAUMA CAN TAKE

Power and connection

Herman described trauma at its core as an experience of powerlessness and disconnection from others.



WHAT RECOVERY CAN RESTORE

Empowerment and new connection

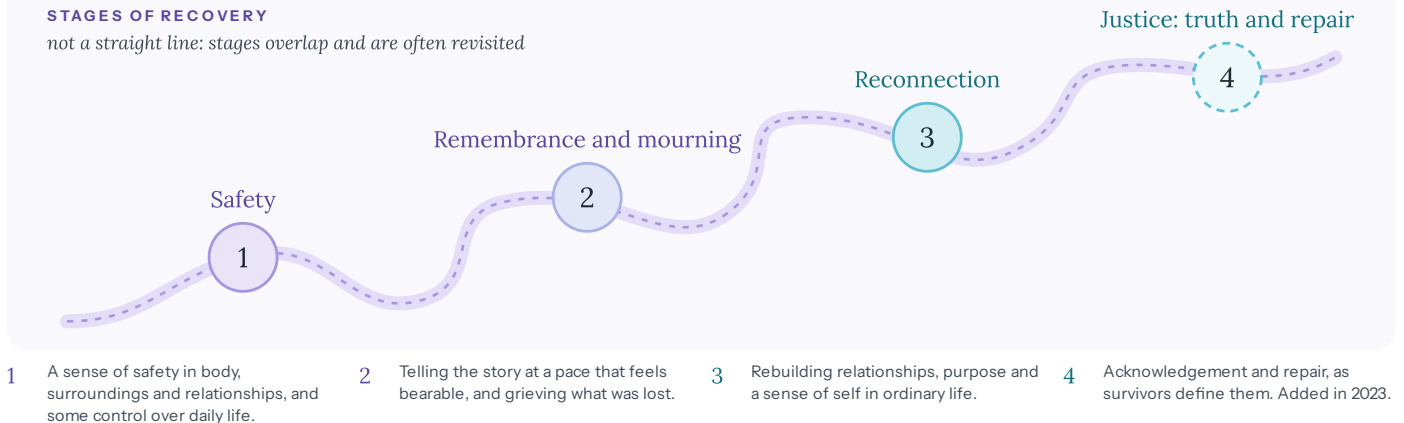
Recovery is described as regaining a sense of agency and building connection, within safe relationships.

01 A path of recovery

original illustration of her stage model

STAGES OF RECOVERY

not a straight line: stages overlap and are often revisited



02 Six key ideas

in plain language

Empowerment

Recovery centres on the survivor regaining choice and control. Helpers support, rather than direct, that process.

Recovery in relationship

Healing is described as happening within safe, respectful relationships, not in isolation.

Complex PTSD

In 1992 she described a pattern seen after prolonged, repeated trauma, affecting emotions, identity and relationships.

Safety comes first

Establishing enough safety and stability is usually the first focus, before going further into painful memories.

Bearing witness

Survivors need others, including communities, to acknowledge what happened rather than look away.

Justice as healing

Her 2023 work, based on survivors' own views, emphasises truth, acknowledgement, repair and preventing future harm.

03 A life's work in brief



04 Reflecting on these ideas

optional

You do not need to write about what happened. These questions are about the present and small steps forward.

What helps me feel even a little safer, in my body, surroundings or relationships?

Who or what helps me feel connected, even briefly?

What would recovery look like for me, in small steps?

One small step towards safety or connection this week: _____

To bring to my next session: _____

A NOTE ON THE EVIDENCE

Herman's stages are a clinical framework drawn from experience rather than a tested sequence, and are often used flexibly. They shaped phase-based approaches to complex trauma, though debate continues about how much stabilisation is needed first.

SOURCES

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