

What Does "Processing Trauma" Mean?

BEYOND THE BUZZWORD

"Processing trauma" is a phrase used often, but rarely explained. It does not mean simply retelling what happened, and it does not require reliving the event in detail. At its core, it means helping the brain and body update a memory that has become stuck.

COMMON MISCONCEPTION

- You must retell the story in full, vivid detail
- Healing means no longer feeling anything about it
- It has to happen all at once, or not at all
- Talking is the only way to process something
- If it still hurts, processing hasn't worked

VS

WHAT IT ACTUALLY MEANS

- Building tolerance to think about it without being overwhelmed
- Reducing the emotional charge the memory carries
- Can happen gradually, at a pace the system can tolerate
- Can happen through talk, body, art, movement or relationship
- Some sadness or grief can remain, even after real healing

What Processing Involves

The underlying goals, regardless of method

Making Sense of It

Building a coherent understanding of what happened, rather than fragments that feel confusing or ever-present.

Reducing the Charge

Lowering the intensity of the body's alarm response when the memory is recalled or triggered.

Integration

Placing the memory in the past, as part of your story, rather than something still happening now.

Signs Something Is Shifting

Markers that a memory is becoming less "stuck"

LESS INTRUSIVE

Fewer unwanted memories, flashbacks, or intrusive images breaking through.

EASIER TO THINK ABOUT

Able to bring it to mind on purpose, without being pulled into it.

FEELS LIKE THE PAST

A growing sense that it happened then, not that it's happening now.

BODY SETTLES FASTER

Physical reactions to reminders become smaller and pass more quickly.

MORE CHOICE

Responses feel more like choices, and less like automatic reactions.

It's Not Just Talking

Approaches such as EMDR, somatic therapies, art, movement and relational safety can all support processing — talking through the story in detail is only one path among several.

A Note on Pacing

Good trauma work is titrated — approached in small, tolerable doses. Going too fast, or too deep too soon, can overwhelm rather than help.

Processing trauma is not about erasing what happened. It's about changing your relationship to it.

A guiding principle of trauma-informed care

SOURCES

van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Viking.
Shapiro, F. (2001). *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

© 2026 B&F Clinical Psychology
For educational purposes only.
Not a substitute for professional advice.