Rebuilding a Sense of Agency

AFTER TRAUMA

What can I choose now?

Trauma can take choice away. What happened was not in your control, and afterwards the world can feel as if it still decides for you. Agency returns gradually, often through small, ordinary choices made again and again.

AFTER TRAUMA, LIFE CAN FEEL UNRAVELLED

TODAY
"I can choose what I eat today."

BOUNDARIES
"I need a little more space."

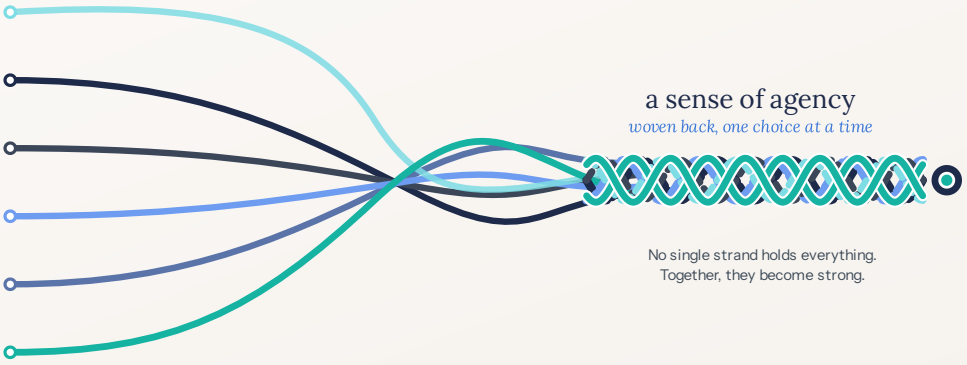
SAYING NO
"No, thank you."

SAYING YES
"Yes, I'd like that."

DECISIONS
"I'm ready to look at this."

ONE SMALL ACT
"I'll take one small step."

EACH CHOICE ADDS A STRAND



a sense of agency
woven back, one choice at a time

No single strand holds everything.
Together, they become strong.

Some threads are not in your hands right now. Noticing that is not failure.

01–04 Everyday choices

write what feels true; a few words is enough

01 Choices I can make today

TODAY

What is mine to decide, even in a small way?
e.g. what I eat, the route I walk, when I rest, what I wear

02 Boundaries I can set

BOUNDARIES

Where do I need more space, time or protection?
e.g. "I'm not ready to talk about that." "I need to leave by eight."

03 Things I can say no to

YES & NO

What costs me more than it gives?
e.g. an invitation I'd accept only out of guilt, one extra task

no

04 Things I can say yes to

YES & NO

What would I welcome back, gently?
e.g. a short walk with a friend, music I used to love, rest

yes

05 Decisions I have been avoiding

DECISIONS

Avoidance is understandable. One small step is enough.

THE DECISION	WHAT MAKES IT HARD	THE SMALLEST NEXT STEP

06 · the strand you add — One small act of agency this week

Small enough that you could do it even on a hard day.

What I will do

When and where

What might get in the way

Who or what can support me

Afterwards, how did it feel?

☐ *done*

WHY THIS MATTERS

Judith Herman described restoring power and control to the survivor as the guiding principle of recovery (Herman, 1992). Across disasters, combat and assault, people's belief in their ability to cope has been found to play a central role in posttraumatic recovery (Benight & Bandura, 2004). Small, achievable choices are one way to rebuild that belief.

Go gently

Agency is not about doing everything alone. Asking for help is a choice too. If you feel unsafe, please reach out to a GP, a therapist or a crisis service.

SOURCES

Benight, C. C., & Bandura, A. (2004). Social cognitive theory of posttraumatic recovery: The role of perceived self-efficacy. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 42*(10), 1129–1148.

Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence, from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.

© 2026 B&F Clinical Psychology · Evidence-informed educational resource · For educational purposes only.