



Life BEYOND
YOUR STORY

BENEATH THE SURFACE



CREATING A PATH OF INTEGRATION

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Introduction

WHY I WROTE THIS E-BOOK

I'm Tammy Aston, a Somatic Wellness Coach who is passionate about creating safe spaces and helping people come into their own. Looking back on my journey of healing from Complex PTSD, there are many things I wish I knew or that someone had shared with me.

The most important thing I wish I understood when I first started my healing journey was how important it is to learn how to regulate my nervous system, how to feel grounded in the now. How to feel present, and most importantly, how to feel safe in my own skin.

For trauma survivors, triggers are everywhere.

Therapy is triggering. Writing a memoir about trauma is triggering. Every day events that remind us (or our bodies) of the trauma can be triggering.

I know I went through a whole experience when I was engaged to my husband. It was like the blending of our lives was triggering me somehow. It was with my breath that I found balance and could navigate the way ahead.

Talk therapy has its role in the journey and I think doing some form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in the beginning is the way to go.

I also believe in psychoeducation. In the beginning, we learn from the wisdom of others. Psychoeducation is a way to raise your awareness of how trauma has impacted you. It's where we gain skills and understanding that lead to a better way of living.



It's through phychoeducation that I found writings that described my experience. This was extremely validating. I live with Complex PTSD (C-PTSD), and for years I didn't have a name for what I was experiencing—only that I often felt unsafe, on edge, and disconnected from myself. Understanding my experience gave me a new language and direction for healing.

The final leg of the journey includes the body, specifically our vagus nerve. Our trauma is in our bodies. Our bodies are our unconscious mind. In it, there is no time, no space. It just knows fight, flight, freeze, and fawn (and some have included annihilate).

The exercises included in this ebook will help you throughout your whole journey. If you include the nervous system regulation and body work in the beginning, it's possible that healing will happen faster than if it's not. These exercises are intended to help you establish a sense of safety in your body and in your life.

It doesn't matter where you are on your journey, the most important thing is that you take the first step.

Let's begin.

Coming Home to The Body

FINDING YOUR ANCHOR

When you've experienced trauma, it's not just your mind that remembers—it's your body, too. Somatic practices are those that engage the body and are often not just helpful—they're essential.

Somatic practices help us shift from a state of immobility or shut down into movement, into activation, and into regulation, connection, and a sense of wholeness. It's not always linear. But over time, somatic work invites your body to reawaken—to feel safe, present, and alive again.

Before you begin these practices, it's helpful to identify an anchor—something that helps you feel safe, steady, and present in the moment.

An anchor could be feeling your feet on the floor, the rhythm of your breath, the sound of a calming music playlist, or even holding a comforting object like a stone or blanket.

Anchors remind your nervous system that you're here, now—and that it's okay enough to explore. If at any point during these exercises you feel overwhelmed, return to your anchor. It's not a setback—it's self-care. Anchors are not about holding you back; they're about helping you stay rooted while you grow.



EXAMPLES OF ANCHORS

HERE ARE A FEW GROUNDING TOOLS TO CONSIDER AS YOU MOVE THROUGH THE PRACTICES:

1. Feeling the sensation of your feet on the ground
2. Your slow, steady breath—inhale... exhale... each one even in length
3. A smooth stone or small object you can hold
4. Perhaps a calming sound, like soft music or a nature track

5. Placing your hand on your heart or abdomen
6. Looking out the window at a tree, sky, or horizon
7. A scent of some sort - like a rosewood aromatherapy essential oil

You might already have something that brings you comfort or helps you feel steady—trust it.

IDENTIFY YOUR ANCHOR

BEFORE MOVING ON, TAKE A MOMENT TO PAUSE AND REFLECT:

Do you have a favorite song, artist or genre of music that calms your spirits?

Do you like the sound of rain or waterfalls? Are there other sounds from nature that you find soothing?

What helps you feel safe, calm, or present?

Write it down here or say it aloud:

My anchor is: _____

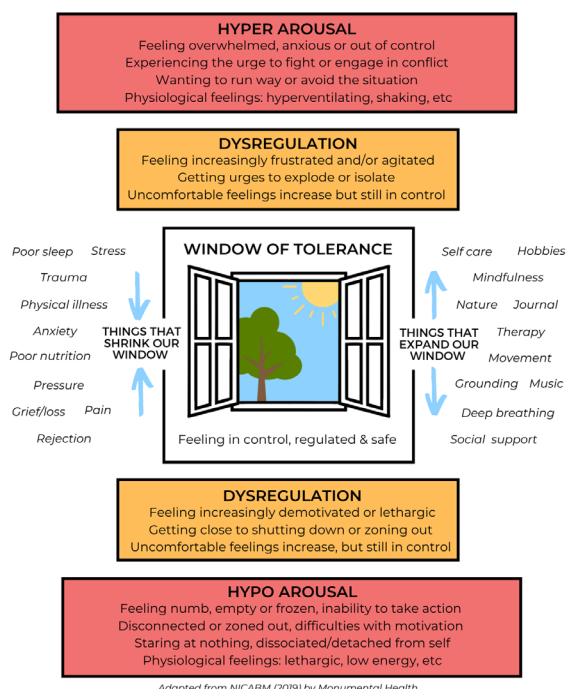
Whenever you feel overwhelmed, come back to your anchor for however long you need to feel yourself again.

Window Of Tolerance

The window of tolerance is another concept I regret not learning sooner.

SO, WHAT IS THIS “WINDOW OF TOLERANCE?” YOU ASK?

“Window of Tolerance” is the term that Dr. Dan Siegel originated. It helps us understand our brain and body’s normal reactions to stress, especially after adversity. Think of it as your nervous system’s comfort zone.



Being inside our window means we are in the Optimal Zone. Our nervous system is in balance. We’re calm, yet alert and engaged. We can think clearly, communicate well, handle life’s challenges, and recover when things go off track.

Stress, however, narrows that window.

If we experience too much stress or the lingering effects of trauma, we can be pushed outside of it. We either become hyper-aroused (think: anxiety, rage, panic) or hypo-aroused (think: shutdown, numbness, hopelessness). These responses are ancient survival mechanisms, deeply rooted in our biology. And when we’re outside the window, learning, listening, or even thinking clearly becomes incredibly hard.

Your nervous system might be “stuck” in one of these extremes if you have experienced repeated or toxic stress. You may find it hard to stay calm or get motivated, not because you’re doing anything wrong—but because your system is still in survival mode.

SO HOW DO WE BRING OURSELVES BACK INTO THE WINDOW? IS IT POSSIBLE TO TONE THE NERVOUS SYSTEM IN A SIMILAR WAY TO TONING A MUSCLE?

INDEED, THE ANSWER IS YES!

Similar to how cardio strengthens the heart and strength training builds muscles, deep breathing tones the nervous system. Mindful movement, regular rest, social connection, and somatic practices all help.

Treat yourself with kindness. Be patient. This is a practice.

IN THE NEXT TWO WEEKS, A SIMPLE APPROACH IS BEST TO BEGIN WITH. DO BOTH 2-3 TIMES EACH DAY:

1. Inhale and exhale deeply a couple of times.
2. Sense the feeling of your feet making contact with the ground.

By taking one breath at a time, you can give yourself the gift of a regulated nervous system.

HERE IS WHERE YOU CAN TRACK YOUR PROGRESS.

WEEK ONE

WEEK TWO

I Welcome You Back

A BODY BASED BEGINNING

This somatic awareness practice is a gentle way to reconnect with your body—especially if you’ve been feeling numb, shutdown, or disconnected. You can do it alone, in your own time and space, with no need to explain or perform for anyone else. It’s not about getting it “right.” It’s about building relationships—with yourself.

The source is Peter Levine PhD’s book, *In an Unspoken Voice*. —



WHAT YOU’LL NEED

1. A shower
2. About 10 minutes

STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS

1. Turn on the shower and adjust the water to a comfortable temperature. Let the rhythm of the water become your anchor. You’re not rushing here—this is sacred time.
2. Begin with the backs of your hands. Hold them under the stream of water. Notice what you feel. Whether it’s warmth, tingling, numbness, or nothing at all—it’s okay.
3. Move slowly. Gently shift the water’s focus to the palms of your hands, your wrists, forearms, and shoulders. Then move to your neck, head, underarms, sides, chest, back, and so on. Include as much of your body as you feel ready to explore.
4. Say Hello
5. As you attend to each area, whisper: “This is my [arm, neck, leg, etc.]. I welcome you back.” If words feel too much, a quiet acknowledgment in your mind is enough.
6. Stay present with Sensation. Let your awareness rest on each area as the water pulses against it. Breathe. Just notice. Even if all you feel is discomfort or blankness—that’s information, too.
7. Optional Variation: Gentle Tapping
8. If you prefer, or after you shower, you can do the same process by tapping each part of your body with your fingertips. Use the same affirming words: “This is my... I welcome you back.”

AFTER COMPLETING THIS PRACTICE, TAKE A FEW MOMENTS TO REFLECT:

What sensations did I notice in my body today?

Where in my body did I feel the sensation?

Was there a part of me that surprised me—either by what I felt or didn't feel?

How did it feel to say, "I welcome you back" to myself?

Coming back into your body is a tender process. It's okay if it feels strange, slow, or even emotional. Every moment you spend bringing your awareness to your body is an act of reclaiming yourself. There is nothing broken about you. You are rebuilding trust, one breath and one sensation at a time.

BODY BOUNDARIES

A sequel to this shower exercise involves bringing boundary awareness into the muscles.

You start by using a hand to grasp and gently squeeze the opposite forearm; then you squeeze the upper arm, the shoulders, neck, thighs, calves, feet, etc.

The important element is to be mindful of how your muscles feel from the inside as they are being squeezed. You can recognize the rigidity or flaccidity of the tissue and its general quality of aliveness.

Tight, constricted muscles are associated with the alarm and hypervigilance of the sympathetic arousal system.

Flaccid muscles belie how the body collapses when dominated by the immobilization system.

With flaccid muscles, you need to linger and gently hold them, almost as though you were holding a baby.

With the practice of gentle, focused touch and resistance exercises, you can learn to bring life back into those muscles as the fragile fibers learn to fire coherently and thus vitalize the organism.

As body consciousness grows, so too will a more palpable sense of boundary awareness, as well as greater aliveness.

For some people, classes in gentle yoga or martial arts, such as tai chi, aikido or chi gong, can be beneficial in restoring connection to their bodies and defining body boundaries.

For these classes to be helpful, it is important that the teacher have some experience in working with traumatized individuals.

AFTER COMPLETING THIS PRACTICE, TAKE A FEW MOMENTS TO REFLECT:

As you worked through each muscle group, what sensations did you notice? Were certain areas tighter or more relaxed than others? What emotions arose alongside those sensations?

How did this exercise shift your awareness of your physical boundaries? Did you feel more grounded, spacious, or secure afterward?

If you lingered on an area of flaccid or tense muscle, what was it like to offer it gentle attention? How might you extend that same kindness to other parts of your body—or your life—that need care?

Getting Reacquainted With Who You Really Are

WHY GET REACQUAINTED?

Our abusers held so much power over us when we were in their care. Often, we grow up and move out on our own and develop our own lives, but our patterns can stay the same.

I found the next two exercises in the book, *Complex PTSD: from Surviving to Thriving* by Pete Walker.

The first part of this exercise is an intellectual exercise. Writing out your responses creates a resource you can use repeatedly. If you find yourself triggered, emotionally overwhelmed, pull it out and read it to yourself. It is an impressive list to turn to remember who you really are.

The second part of this exercise is a somatic-based exercise. After you write out your responses, take a moment to pause and really feel the sensations in your body as you remember.

1. Where in your body do you feel the sensation
2. Describe the sensation

Making a written record of your positive attributes is helpful for when you get overwhelmed, find yourself in a spiral, or are otherwise emotionally distressed.

When one of these things happens, it often creates a temporary amnesia about your essential worthiness and goodness. If you're like me, when I'm triggered, I feel rage, then depression, and that's when the self-doubt sets in and lingers for a while.

In my experience, memorizing these two lists enhances your capacity to dissolve that amnesia.

READ IT TO YOURSELF WHEN YOU DOUBT YOURSELF, GET DEPRESSED, OR SPIRAL.

12X12 GRATITUDE FOR SELF

This exercise intends to build self-esteem. It helps deconstruct your inner critic, that inner voice that is critical and negative within your mind that judges and demeans you.

It is best approached as a work in progress.

Try to think of twelve entries for each category.

Resist the critic’s all-or-nothing dynamic, and list something if it is true of you a good deal of the time.

Work on it when you are not emotionally overwhelmed or in a spiral. If you can’t think of anything, ask someone you trust enough to help you.

Try to think of twelve entries for each category. _____

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

What accomplishments or achievements are you proud of?

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____
- 5. _____
- 6. _____
- 7. _____
- 8. _____
- 9. _____
- 10. _____
- 11. _____
- 12. _____

GOOD DEEDS

What are acts of kindness or other ways you've helped your fellow humans?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

TRAITS

What are your positive character traits?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

PEEK EXPERIENCES

What moments in life have brought you pure joy and elation?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

LIFE ENJOYMENTS

What are your most memorable memories?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

INTENTIONS

What are your intentions? With money? With relationships?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

GOOD HABITS

What habits have you developed that move you forward or ease your overwhelm?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

JOBS

What is your passion? What job made you smile?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

SUBJECTS STUDIED

What are your favorite topics? Is it a sport, a book genre, music? What do you read about most if you're on your phone?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

OBSTACLES OVERCOME

What are the challenges you've overcome?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

GRACE RECEIVED

Who has forgiven you? What part of yourself have you forgiven? What lesson did you learn?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

NURTURING MEMORIES

What memories do you think of the most? These can be from any part of your life.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

Take a deep breath. _____

Another key sign of recovering is that your critic begins to shrink and lose its dominance over your psyche.

12X12 GRATITUDE FOR OTHERS

This exercise helps deconstruct the outer critic, the part of you that projects negative, critical judgements onto others, perceiving them as flawed, untrustworthy or dangerous.

It's best approached as a work in progress.

Try to think of twelve entries for each category.

Work on it when you are not emotionally overwhelmed or in a spiral. If you can't think of anything, ask someone you trust enough to help you.

Try to think of twelve entries for each category. _____

FRIENDS, PAST AND CURRENT

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

INSPIRING PEOPLE

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

INSPIRING AUTHORS OR FAMOUS PEOPLE

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

SCHOOL FRIENDS (WHETHER YOU ARE STILL IN CONTACT)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

CIRCLE OF FRIENDS, PAST AND CURRENT

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

CHILDHOOD FRIENDS

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

TEACHERS

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

PETS AND ANIMALS

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

WORK FRIENDS, PAST AND CURRENT

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

GROUPS, PAST AND CURRENT

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

NURTURING MEMORIES OF OTHERS

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

Go back now and add the somatic part. _____

Take a moment to pause and really feel the sensations in your body as you remember.

1. Where in your body do you feel the sensation
2. Describe the sensation

TAKE A DEEP BREATH. YOU'VE DONE WELL.

In Closing

It is my hope that you can close this book inspired at what is possible. Inspired that healing is possible. Inspired that a life well lived is possible.

Our stories are meant to be shared with the world. I was told a few years ago that there is someone out there that needs to hear my story. They need to hear it to know that there is hope. I want the same for you. I want you to heal enough to share your story. And then someone will hear your story and they will begin their journey in healing. And with each of us telling our stories and not holding in our shame, the ripple grows, similar to the ripple you see when you throw a pebble in the pond.

If you're interested, I have a core-centering group program I run on Substack through Life Beyond Your Story. As a paid monthly or annual member, you'll get access to my Live sessions where we do exercises to tune our vagus nerve. I call it Tune In Tuesday. We meet every Tuesday at 7:30pm ET. I know this time isn't ideal for everyone, but I always post the recordings so you can watch them when you have the time.

If you're not yet ready, that's okay too. I would like to encourage you to sign up for my free newsletter, Transformation Tuesdays. It is about more than just information—it's about transformation. In it, I'll help you renew your mind - expand your awareness. You can change your story, change your life.

Here's the link to subscribe: <https://tammyaston24.substack.com/subscribe>

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