

Honoring the Merry-Go-Round

by Deanne E. Coolidge

As I've written before, I come from an abusive home. I am also a rape survivor with PTSD. But. But. I'm one of the lucky ones. I have been fortunate to have the financial resources to afford years of treatment with the support of an army of gifted, compassionate professionals (my healing posse), and I've learned a lot. I've been thinking it might be time to pay it forward, especially now when life feels like a very big job for many of us.

Not to diminish the value of these messages, but I'm not going to write about the importance of being grateful, thinking positively, finding humor, or looking for distractions. FB is flooded with them. Right now, I have 238 images saved to a photo folder that I regularly flip through, and I'm on book #40 for this year. For me, they work best for what I call "Let's get through this! We can do this!" maintenance. I want to cheer for myself and the world! But when I'm in crisis, I need to pull out other tools that speak directly to my individual experiences, my own needs, and honor the depth and breadth of my own pain. Sometimes I feel guilty when the cheering isn't working. But that just turns my anxiety into cement.

PTSD is a specific form of anxiety, but in my opinion, anxiety is anxiety. These are anxious times whether you have a history of mental illness or not. When you feel vulnerable, a lot of "old stuff" that you thought you had worked through can start bubbling up again. With this pandemic, there is plenty of "new stuff" to worry about as well. These days, it could be something from your long ago past or something from yesterday. So here's what works for me:

NEST. The year of my divorce and after several significant surgeries, I tore my house apart. Fully recognizing my privilege here, I ripped off the roof and siding, pulled up the floors, knocked down walls, and opened ceilings. I knew what was in every drawer, cupboard, and corner. I filled it with beautiful things that I adore—art, books, pretty cloth napkins, lovely pieces of glass. When I no longer had the distraction of the renovation, I showed up on a therapist's doorstep in a state of collapse that I had never experienced and said, I don't know what I'm doing, but I know if I keep doing it—I will die. It was that clear and that terrifying. She told me, I might not know what I was doing inside myself, but on some level, I knew it was time to get help. I had created a safe, beautiful place to do the hard work. There is a reason that I am now going room by room and cleaning and ordering my house. Yes, it's something to do, but I'm making sure that my home is still a safe, clean, and beautiful place, while honoring the part of me that grew up in a house of chaos and ugliness. We are all experiencing some degree of chaos in our lives right now, and there is a lot of ugliness in today's politics. Consider what might help you in your physical space. What can you touch that you love to have around you? Put your hands on your books, rearrange photographs of your family, move around furniture, scrub your windows. How can you support the part of you that is anxious? Nesting is grounding. It keeps you from thinking about your past and fretting about the future.

Related to nesting, MAKE SOME WHITE SPACE. After the Kavanaugh hearings and before the 2018 midterms, I went into full-blown PTSD like never before. For days, I relived my traumas

over and over again, and like I did when I was a child, I became hyper-aware, and started looking for ways out. I was manic. Everything felt predatory, even drinking a glass of water. I sat in a room with lots of windows; Henry moved furniture and took things off walls. And with some time, sleep, and help from my doctors and therapist, I was able to process and move through the episode. Some of you might feel like the walls are closing in. Maybe it's time to put some things away for a little while and create some white space. Open up those shades and curtains, and let some light in.

CREATE NEW PLACES IN YOUR HEAD. I am a visual person, but this works for things you might hear or touch too. I've experienced "classic" PTSD when I'm reliving trauma, but getting images stuck in my head can be equally as terrifying and paralyzing. I recently read a book that included a physical description of women who had just been raped by soldiers in Vietnam. It was stunning. I have a place in my head where I put images that upset me. But I also want that place to value them. It's a huge, fancy, luxurious merry-go-round, with lively, musical tones, pretty colors, loving chatter, and smiling, laughing adults and children who are holding hands, embracing each other, or maybe reaching for the brass ring. When an image like the one of the women comes up, I gently place it onto the merry-go-round and take a moment to honor my own suffering and the suffering of others. It's easier said than done sometimes. It took me three days of spinning over the book's image before I even remembered the merry-go-round, and even then, it took repeated efforts before I was able to make the image stick. But I worked at it because I knew it would help. I also have a newsreel farther back in my mind's eye that is spinning so fast that I can't clearly see what's on it. When the image of Kavanaugh's scowl or Trump making fun of the disabled reporter comes up, I don't gently place it on the newsreel—I throw it like a fast ball to try to shatter it. The truth is these kinds of images will never completely shatter for me. They'll be somewhere on that newsreel. But it's incredibly empowering to have a strategy for when they revisit or for when new images pop up.

REACH OUT AND SAY IT OUT LOUD. This one is hard. If I reach out to someone, I need to trust they will be there for me without judgement or a lot of "you should," which, for me, is just another form of judgement. When I was in the intense phase of therapy, I worried what people would think of me if they heard about what I considered my "sordid" past. One of the best pieces of advice I received from my therapist was the simple truth that there would be people who would do just that. It was going to happen. She confirmed my greatest fear, but at the same time, it was incredibly freeing to realize I couldn't control what others thought, so maybe it was time to stop worrying about it. Oh, I do still struggle with this one. But I'm OK with that. It's coming from a place of pain, and I try to recognize that and give myself a gentle hug. Wounds and bruises heal with love and patience, but the scars can still hurt sometimes.

Notice the word "out" in "say it out loud." It's much like the idea of the merry-go-round. Inner wounds and worry fester. When you say the words out loud, they go—OUT. They lose some of their teeth and claws. Journaling is another strategy. So is exercise. When I pounded my feet on the stair stepper, I could feel the fear dislodging from my bones and shaking out of my pores. Nothing was going to hurt me. We all have time to breathe. Breathe in deeply for a slow count of 5, strong breath out for a slow count of 9. Do it 5 times and time yourself. It

takes about a minute. Do it another 5 times, and that's 5 minutes. Try talking to your dog. And for those of you who pray to a higher power, hand it to him or her. One of my favorite Anne Lamott quotes is this: "To God. Here. Knock yourself out."

In every classroom and office I've worked in since I've been an educator, I've put up a banner that reads: "To teach is to learn twice." I hope you find something that speaks to you from this post, but writing it helped me too. I think about this quote from the 238 quotes I have in my file: "On particularly rough days, I like to remind myself that my track record for getting through bad days so far is 100%, and that's pretty good." We've got this.