

Part One

Psychological Trauma, Implicit Memory, and the Verbal Logical Explainer (VLE)

Psychological Trauma

When I present this material as a seminar, I start with the question: “How many of you have ever had a painful experience?” and people laugh. They laugh because we all have painful experiences, and this reality is so obvious that the question is absurd. The question should not be *whether* we encounter pain, but rather “What do we do *when* we encounter pain?” So, what *do* we *do* when we encounter pain?

The Pain Processing Pathway

When we encounter pain, our brain-mind-spirit system always tries to process the painful experience. There is a very deliberate pathway that this pain processing attempt will follow, and there are specific processing tasks that we must complete as we travel along this pathway, such as maintaining organized attachment, staying connected, staying relational, navigating the situation in a satisfying way, and correctly interpreting the meaning of the experience (figure 1.1).¹ When we are able to successfully complete this

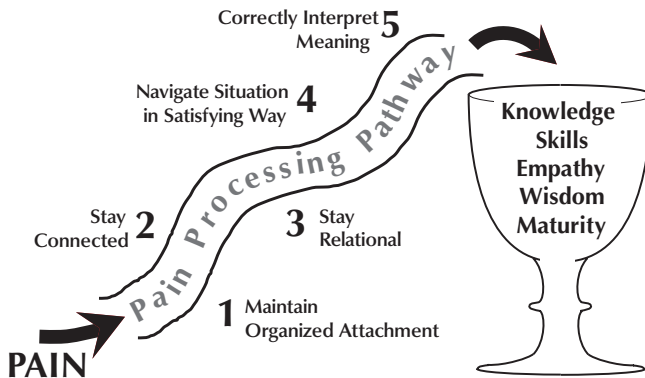


Figure 1.1 The pain processing pathway, with a representative task from each of the five levels of processing

1. Just in case you are concerned that you don’t know what I mean by “maintaining organized attachment,” “staying connected,” or “staying relational,” mostly all you need to know for the purposes of this book is that there is a pathway for processing painful experiences, and it includes a series of specific processing tasks. At the few points where you will need to know more, I will provide the additional information when we get there.

processing journey, we get through the painful experience without being traumatized—we emotionally and cognitively “metabolize” the experience in a healthy way, and instead of having any toxic power in our lives, the adequately processed painful experience contributes to our knowledge, skills, empathy, wisdom, and maturity. That is, when we successfully process a painful experience we don’t just stuff it down into our unconscious, or teach ourselves to think about other things. We actually get through it, stronger and wiser. There’s an old saying, “Suffering will either make you bitter or better.” Successfully completing the pain processing pathway is what ensures that we get better rather than bitter.

Unfortunately, various problems and/or limitations can block successful processing; and when we are *not* able to complete the processing journey, then the painful experience becomes a traumatic experience and the memories for these traumatic experiences carry unresolved toxic content.² As described in much more detail below, this unresolved toxic content has lots of negative effects, and these negative effects often include the bitterness mentioned in the old saying.

Trauma Is More Easily Caused and More Common Than Most Realize

Recognizing that psychological trauma comes from failure to successfully complete the journey through the pain processing pathway leads to a very important point regarding what kind of experiences can end up being traumatic. This point is discussed in much greater detail in the “Brain Science, Psychological Trauma, and the God Who Is with Us” essays, but the short summary is: *you don’t need the overwhelming negative emotions and physical pain of military combat or tsunami disasters to create psychological trauma.* In fact, if you are a child without anyone in your community who can help make sure you get through the processing pathway successfully, and a painful experience presents a challenge where your personal processing skills are especially weak, ***even a fairly minor painful experience can result in psychological trauma.***

For example, I grew up in the turbulent 1960s in a church with a heavy emphasis on social justice and radical discipleship. The zealous young

2. Note that this *very, very* brief summary of the pain processing pathway and psychological trauma is specifically designed to provide context for the material presented in this book. Processing tasks at each of the five levels of the pain processing pathway, psychological trauma, traumatic memories, and tools for resolving traumatic memories are all discussed in much greater detail in the “Brain Science, Psychological Trauma, and the God Who Is with Us” essay series (parts 1 through 6), all available as free downloads from www.kclehman.com.

leaders constantly challenged us to follow the Lord no matter what the cost, and repeatedly emphasized that there should be nothing in our lives that we weren't willing to sacrifice for Jesus. To my young mind it felt like every other sermon was on "Take up your cross and follow me," and that the ones in between were distributed equally between "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out," the story of Abraham being told to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and the story where Jesus tells the rich young ruler: "Sell all you have, give it to the poor, and then come and follow me."

These challenges and exhortations were appropriate for the grown-ups in the congregation—from the foundation of adult maturity, it was appropriate that they hear these invitations to *choose* sacrifice, and they also had the cognitive maturity to be able to correctly understand how Jesus intended these passages to be received. However, as a four-year-old still working on the child maturity task of learning how to take care of myself, I was frightened and overwhelmed by these teachings that I received with the very concrete, literal understanding of a small child. I remember thinking about what it would be like to pluck out one of my eyes—visualizing ramming my fingers into my eye socket as hard as I possibly could, and wondering if I would ever have the courage and strength to actually do it. And I remember thinking about the "Sell all you have, give it to the poor, and then come and follow me" passage. I had no idea where one went in response to the "and then come and follow me" part of the passage, but I was pretty sure it meant that I couldn't stay in my house. I remember imagining what it would be like to walk out into the alley naked (at four years old, "sell *all* you have" includes clothing), with no home to go back to and no parents to care for me. At first the whole scenario felt totally overwhelming—it seemed like the shame would be unbearable, and I was frightened by the prospect of slowly starving to death. Fortunately, I eventually figured out that I could hide under people's porches during the day, to escape the embarrassment of everybody seeing me running around the neighborhood naked, and then I could come out at night and get food out of people's trash cans.

During this same time in my life, small group fellowship meetings were often held in our living room, next to my bedroom. My bed was right by the door, and I often overheard what was being said as I lay in bed waiting to fall asleep. On a number of occasions, one person especially talked about how God had taken away her jobs, boyfriends, and other treasures so that she wouldn't have any idols—so that "nothing would be before God" in her life. When I think back on this, my perception is that she totally missed the dynamic of the request on God's part, she missed the appropriate place for free will in the equation, and she didn't talk as if she perceived God as her

friend. That is, she did *not* seem to be saying, “I *want* to love God more than anything else, and I’ve been asking him to help me dismantle idolatry in my life. Even though it’s been very painful, I’m *grateful* that he has removed the things I was wrongly worshiping.” Instead, there was more of the sense that God was her adversary, and that he was taking and destroying the precious things in her life *without her permission or agreement*. The adults in the sharing group with her probably realized that her perception of God’s heart was distorted, and they may even have discussed this at some point; but as a four-year-old in the next room, hearing only pieces of these conversations, I was frightened and confused by her comments.

As part of my unsuccessful attempts to process these experiences I came to distorted conclusions about God’s character and heart. Instead of feeling safe in God’s love for me, trusting that his plans were good, and being truly willing to lay down anything in my life if it were necessary, I felt that God was pathologically insecure and controlling—I felt that he spent a lot of his time prowling around snatching things away from his children, demanding that we give up anything that might be precious to us in order to prove our allegiance, submission, and obedience, and in order to “keep our priorities straight.” For example, as I grew older I wanted very much to get married, so I feared that God would demand that I remain single in order to prevent me from loving *someone* more than him; I had been able to purchase a pair of binoculars and a ten-speed bicycle after years of saving my paper-route money, so I feared that God would take these treasured possessions to prevent me from loving some *thing* more than him; and doing well in school was very important to me, so I feared that God would intentionally mess up my studies and give me bad grades to prevent me from getting too attached to academic success. I can remember trying to “hide” my bicycle and binoculars by thinking about them as little as possible, while deliberately focusing more of my attention on less important possessions, like my pocketknife and my pet turtle. My hope was that God would follow the focus of my attention, erroneously conclude that the knife and the turtle were the idols that needed to be confiscated, but then miss the hidden treasures that were actually more precious. I can even remember bargaining with God: “You can have all my other stuff if I can keep my bicycle and binoculars,” or even “I’ll throw in the bicycle AND the binoculars if you just let me get married and don’t mess up my grades.”

I never *wanted* to believe these perceptions regarding the Lord’s character and heart, and truth carried in my non-traumatic memories told me that this picture of a petty, insecure, and mean God was distorted. I fought these distorted perceptions whenever they came forward, and the struggle slowly

improved through years of discipleship and personal spiritual growth, as I spent thousands of hours studying the Bible, studying a wide variety of books arguing for God’s goodness, praying, receiving pastoral care, reading true stories that provided examples of the Lord’s goodness, and reminding myself of the evidence for God’s goodness in my own life. It took larger and larger triggers to bring them out, and I got better and better at stuffing them back in. But if it looked like I was about to lose something *really* important, I would rediscover these memory-anchored distorted beliefs about the Lord.

The good news is that Charlotte and I were able to pray through these experiences, and the Lord helped resolve the toxic content in these memories.³ But before this happened, there were more than thirty years during which the unresolved traumatic content from these experiences powerfully affected what I believed about God’s character and heart.

One of Charlotte’s childhood experiences, described in the following first-person account, provides another example of the way in which minor painful events can result in trauma.

When I was in fifth grade, there was a boy in my class who dominated the social dynamics of the group. He wasn’t really a bad kid, but he was a little too smart regarding how to manipulate others, and he didn’t yet have the maturity to use his power for the good of the whole group versus his own ego. And he also was, in a basic fifth-grade sort of a way, quite misogynistic. That is, he was always saying that boys were better than girls, and he would often try to make any classroom election or competition to be about boys versus girls. For example, when we were voting for which one student would have the privilege of doing some coveted task (such as cleaning out the gerbil cage), he would coach all the boys in the classroom to only have one boy nominated—because he had observed that if the girls’ votes were divided over more than one girl candidate, then the one boy on the slate usually won. And everything he succeeded in getting to happen *his* way seemed to prove his assertion that girls were inferior to boys.

One day at recess we were all playing boxball—called four square in some parts of the country—and I don’t remember exactly how it happened, but this young man started giving orders to others. He’d tell one “You get yourself out” and another “Now you go over there”—and none of these “moves” were the usual competitive

3. Now I believe that I should love the Lord with all my heart and all my mind and all my strength, and that I should love and obey the Lord before all else; but now it also feels true that I *choose* this and that the Lord is trying to bring me to this place in the most gentle way possible, as a loving Father. I realize that he might allow pain in this process, but only if it’s the only possible way to accomplish a greater good.

process of the game, but rather his capricious preferences, which for some reason on that day he decided to try to impose on the rest of us. He wasn't physically forcing or threatening anyone. He wasn't verbally threatening, using foul language, or even calling anyone names. He was just issuing commands in a forceful way.

I don't really remember what everyone else's reaction was to this ordering about, but I know that in me, something sort of snapped, or gave way. I just didn't have the strength or sense of self or whatever it was I needed to fight back. So when he told me to get myself out, I did. On the sidelines, my friend Anne, who was a healthier, stronger person than I, was appalled that I would cave in to this boy's orders. "Charlotte! Charlotte! What are you doing?! Don't listen to him!!" she was saying. But I just didn't have it in me to resist. At the time it occurred, I wasn't even aware of this event having any affect on me, but in retrospect I can see that in my unsuccessful attempt to process the experience I internalized the distorted belief: "I'm not as good as a boy/man."

This distorted belief and the shame it caused were actually so subtle that I was never even consciously aware of them until they came forward in an emotional healing session many years later. In this session one of my friends was praying for me, and this memory came to mind. I gave her a brief account of the scenario, just as I have described it here—very matter of fact, with no big swell of emotion—and I was thinking, "Well, this isn't anything traumatic." But then as I pressed in to describing how it felt, the words "He's better than me" popped out of my mouth. And as I said the words, a wave of shame passed over me, like a shudder. And then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the shame was gone and I realized that "He's better than me" no longer felt true.

This was all so low key that I might doubt the significance of both the original childhood experience and the prayer session, but for two things. The first was an incident that happened shortly after the prayer time. Sometime in the next day or so, I was sitting at my desk in my office, and Karl was at his desk across the hall. Out of nowhere, a thought came to me. So since there was no one else in the office, I called out to Karl across the hall, and said, "You know, Dallas Willard isn't better than me." Dallas Willard is an author whom I greatly admire. And Karl said, "Yes, honey." And maybe an hour or so later, another thought came to me, and I said, "You know, Virgil isn't better than me." Virgil was our pastor at the time—a wonderful, godly man. And Karl said, "Yes, honey." And a little while later, the

thought came to me, “Even you—you aren’t better than me.” And Karl patiently said, “Yes, honey,” one more time.

The second piece of evidence indicating the importance of the original experience and confirming God’s healing work is that there have been changes inside of myself that have been both significant and lasting. Since this curious day in which the new truth seemed to be “sinking in,” I have had more confidence, particularly when it comes to relating to men with authority of one kind or another. I can “look them in the eye,” so to speak, in a way that I couldn’t quite do so clearly before. In retrospect, I can also now see that this distorted “I’m not as good as a man” belief contributed to my lifelong lack of confidence and sense of insecurity.

This point about “small” painful experiences sometimes resulting in trauma is so important that I would like to provide another example from my childhood. On my grade-school playground there was a lot of cheating. The biggest, toughest kids were particularly prone to cheat, since no one could stop them, and they found ways to cheat in most of the games we played. They might add points to their scores if they were losing, they might make up new rules that gave them a needed advantage, or they might simply insist that they had made it safely to first base when we could all see that this was not the case. The scenario that bothered me the most was kids cutting in line during batting practice. Each time they finished their turn at the plate, the three or four toughest fifth graders would appear to go to the back of the line, but then every ten seconds or so they would cut forward by three or four kids. Day after day I would stand in line, watching these toughs cut in front of me, knowing that there was nothing I could do about it unless I wanted to get beaten up. And the gym teacher never seemed to notice that these guys got to bat four or five times as often as the rest of us. He was the person with the size and the designated authority to maintain appropriate order, but he did nothing to protect the smaller, more vulnerable kids (like me).

As a result of being unable to successfully process these experiences, bitterness, judgment, feelings of powerlessness, and feelings of helplessness remained in the memories of these events. Then, for many years (until this stuff got resolved), whenever I encountered situations where others were cheating, and especially situations where others were “cutting in line” in one way or another, the toxic content carried in these unresolved playground memories would come forward and I would become both very miserable and very unpleasant to be with. For example, when we would come to a construction zone where some drivers were using the “merge” lane as a

personal bypass lane, and zipping to the front of the line where they were cutting in front of those of us who had been waiting in the good citizen lane for the last forty-five minutes, I would have a sense of being helpless and powerless, I would feel intense anger toward the cheaters, I would feel intense frustration toward “somebody” for not imposing order and fairness in the situation, and I would go back and forth between fuming (with lots of words I won’t use here) and indulging in a macabre little daydream. My little fantasy was that the government would pass a law making it legal to blow these people up, and I would get one of those rocket launchers you can hold on your shoulder (you know—the ones you always see the special forces teams using in the action movies). Then, when one of these guys zips by in the cheater lane, I would lean out my window and send one of those little rockets right through his rear license plate and into his back seat. KABOOM! One less cheater! And then we would roll the burning wreckage to the side of the road and put a sign on it: “This is what happened to the last guy who used the merge lane for a cheater lane.”

Charlotte, on the other hand, was an example of how a person might react in this situation if she were *not* being affected by old trauma. Charlotte could acknowledge that it was frustrating to see people whizzing by and then cutting in at the front of the line, and that these people were being inconsiderate, but she wasn’t all bent out of shape. Her attitude was more along the lines of “We can’t do anything about it, so we might as well make the best of it—let’s just enjoy being together while we’re waiting in line.” Furthermore, she would even offer charitable thoughts regarding the cheaters, such as “They might not be *maliciously* inconsiderate—maybe they just haven’t learned the maturity skill of being able to wait for their turn—maybe being able to go to the front of the line will prevent them from hitting their children when they get home,” or “We don’t know what’s happening in their lives—maybe they’re single parents who’ve had especially hard days, and just can’t deal with waiting longer in the ‘good citizen lane.’” And then she would make additional gracious suggestions, such as: “Even if they do know what they’re doing, we could be part of the solution by choosing to forgive them and pray for them.”⁴

4. In the interest of truth, justice, and humility I will confess my own use of the “cheater lane”: for years as a young driver I was oblivious to the complexity of construction zone traffic flow, and innocently zipped along in the merge lane without even realizing that I was cheating. Even more narcissistically mortifying is the humbling truth that for several years after coming to understand the whole cheater lane phenomena, I found it so unbearable to feel like a helpless victim waiting in the “good citizen lane” that I actually used the cheater lane *fully aware of the fact that I was cheating*.

So, when we came to a construction zone where people were using the merge lane as a cheater lane, the toxic content from my unresolved memories would make me miserable, as I felt powerless, helpless, and furious; Charlotte had to endure the unpleasant experience of being trapped in the car with a husband who was alternating between openly fuming and silently fantasizing about killing people; and instead of participating in the Lord's vision for redemption by forgiving these people and praying for them, I gave the enemy a foothold in my own life by indulging in bitterness, and I contributed to the enemy's schemes for destruction by spewing toxic waste into the spiritual environment.

As you may have noticed, two of these traumatic experiences were caused by kids playing games on grade-school play-grounds in the middle of the day with teachers present, and the third trauma was caused by comments made in the context of Sunday morning church services and small group fellowship meetings. There was no wreckage from a semi running into a passenger car at seventy miles per hour. There weren't any suicide bombers, crazed gunmen, or burning buildings. There weren't any tornadoes, earthquakes, or tidal waves. And there were no rescue squads, no ambulances, and no mangled bodies. In fact, there was no physical violence or physical danger of any kind. Nobody was being forced, violated, or touched inappropriately, and nobody was intoxicated or out of control. Nobody even raised their voices. However, there *were* children who were unable to successfully process painful experiences, and the resulting unresolved toxic content carried in the memories for these experiences caused trouble for many years.

The point here is that psychological trauma is *not* a rare phenomenon carried only by those who have survived overwhelmingly painful experiences, such as natural disasters, military combat, or child abuse. Our perception is that psychological trauma, especially from minor painful events, is much more common than most people realize, and that nobody is completely free of memories carrying unresolved traumatic content.

As you wrestle with whether or not to accept this very important point regarding the commonness of psychological trauma, make sure to note that our formulations of "trauma" and "traumatic" are fundamentally different from the ways most people use these terms. "Traumatic" is often used synonymously with "disastrous," "life threatening," "catastrophic," and other terms you expect to see on the front page of the newspaper; and most definitions of trauma focus on the magnitude/intensity of the painful event. However, our definitions are based *solely* on whether or not the person successfully processes the experience. A trauma is a painful experience that has not been successfully processed. That's it. This means that no matter

how bad an experience is, if it successfully completes the journey through the pain processing pathway, then it will *not* be traumatic. And no matter how *small* a painful experience is, if it does *not* successfully complete the journey through the pain processing pathway, then it *will* be traumatic, and it will have negative, ongoing effects on the person (even though the effects may be small).⁵

The Effects of Trauma

When something in the present activates or “triggers” a traumatic memory, the unresolved toxic content comes out of where it’s stored and becomes part of what a person thinks and feels in the present. This coming forward of incompletely processed memory content into the present causes a wide variety of problems, such as addictions, mysterious physical symptoms, post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders, impaired parenting, difficulty receiving new truth, impaired discernment, and blocked peak performance.⁶ As I will describe shortly, unresolved trauma coming forward and blending with our experience in the present especially causes and/or exacerbates relational conflict, and this applies to every kind of relational conflict you can imagine—marital discord, conflicts between family members, conflicts between friends, conflicts in church, conflicts on the mission field, conflicts between neighbors, conflicts between employers and employees, conflicts between professional colleagues, conflicts between students and teachers, conflicts between warring tribal groups in Africa, conflicts between Arabs and Israelis, and even conflicts between complete strangers.

NOTE REGARDING CHAPTER 1 AS A SAMPLE:

When reading chapter 1 as a representative sample for the rest of the book, it is important to know that this first chapter is not a preview with respect to content. The understanding that psychological trauma = any painful experience that we are not able to successfully process is new, and has many

5. For a much more detailed discussion regarding our formulation of trauma, including discussion of published case studies and clinical research that provide extensive supporting evidence, see section 7 (“Definition of Type B Psychological Trauma”) in “Brain Science, Psychological Trauma, and the God Who Is with Us ~ Part II: The Processing Pathway for Painful Experiences and the Definition of Psychological Trauma.”

6. See section 5 (“Implicit Memory vs Explicit Memory”) in “Brain Science, Psychological Trauma, and the God Who Is with Us ~ Part III: Traumatic Memories vs Non-Traumatic Memories” for additional discussion of how unresolved trauma contributes to each of these issues.

important implications, but the rest of the book in *not* just a much more detailed discussion of this new paradigm for psychological trauma.

For example, the chapters on implicit memory, the verbal logical explainer, and central nervous system extrapolation describe phenomena that will be new to most readers, and then explain how these fascinating phenomena make it possible for unresolved trauma to be affecting us even while we remain completely unaware of this important reality. The chapters on the Immanuel approach present strategic understanding and techniques not included in any other model for emotional healing. The chapters on relational connection circuits combine observations from many different sources to come up with insights that we have not seen presented anywhere else; and these insights are converted into practical tools that can help us recognize when we are being affected by old trauma, and that can also enable us to dramatically reduce the negative impact of the traumatic memories that are affecting us. Finally, the chapters on helping others who are triggered present both understanding that is completely original and interventions that are amazingly effective.

