

# COMPLEX PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving



"Pete Walker's new book is an invaluable, comprehensive resource for anyone with a childhood history of trauma. This book is certain to benefit clients and clinicians alike."

- Julie Scheinman, M.A., MFT

## Pete Walker

*Author of The Tao of Fully Feeling*

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# COMPLEX PTSD: FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING

A GUIDE AND MAP FOR RECOVERING  
FROM CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

**Pete Walker**

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*- Julie Scheinman, M.A., MFT*

**Testimonials about Pete Walker's first book, *The Tao of Fully Feeling*,  
and his website: [www.pete-walker.com](http://www.pete-walker.com)**

I am writing from Survivors of Abuse Recovering (S.O.A.R.) Society, located in Canada. We would like to include "13 Steps for Managing Flashbacks" in our resource manual.

I found myself. I found myself in your words. It's as if you had unzipped me, stepped inside my traumatized inner self, meandered around a bit, come back outside, and wrote about what you discovered inside of me. For the first time in my life.....and I'm in my fifties now.....I don't feel defective.....or crazy.....or "weird".....or even unlovable. — D.M.

I sat in the San Francisco Airport reading your book (in the washroom, shaking and weeping) to get the courage to go the next leg of the trip. It helped me so much just to know that you live in that area-strange when I haven't even met you! Your website and book are invaluable to me. — A. R.

I want to thank you so much for all the help you have given me (and all the people I've passed your website link onto since finding out about it). Your understanding of emotional flashbacks has made an enormous difference in

my life. I've gone from being smashed about by huge waves to having a surfboard on which I can ride at least some of them, and even if I fall off into it, I know it won't last forever. — J, New Zealand

Thank you for all of your educational information with regards to PTSD and abandonment. I have finally found something that I have tried to explain to therapists for years. Every single piece of information is exactly what I experience from my PTSD and attachment depression. — A

I thank you on a personal and professional level. Your articles on healing from CPTSD have excited me and validated me both. I will be a better therapist now, and heal further in my own life. — D

Your article will be one of my regular handouts now to my clients. Needless to say I feel this information and the way you articulate it is a life saver! — L.P

How impactful all you have written has been for me and how much healing I have found in the pages of your website. Like the authors you note in your article on bibliotherapy - I was convinced you would have empathy for me had I the occasion to meet you - and here, in this moment, that belief is powerfully actualized. — J.S.

I have been labeled and diagnosed with everything from panic disorder to separation anxiety and attachment disorder, bipolar disorder, generalized

anxiety, etc. Then I found a therapist who said I had PTSD from long-term emotional abuse from my father and emotional neglect from my mother and that's when things really started to click. I feel like everything I have been reading from this website is the final piece to the puzzle that I have been searching for in my journey. It is indeed very empowering and liberating.

— A.M.

I'm a long way into my own recovery process now and have recently reached a point of wanting to look back and celebrate how far I've come.

Your words were just what I needed to see at this time. I feel really seen and understood and appreciated. What a gift. — P.

After a degree in psychology, training in counseling and decades of therapy this is the first time I've read something that describes my internal state! — F.K.

I've been working with your book for a few years, and for the first time in my life I'm able to be myself and feel a full range of feelings - and my kids are starting to flower due to this hard work. So thank you. — N.A.

I wanted to extend my gratitude for all the information you have made available on complex PTSD. Clearly the best resource on the internet. — J.C.

I found your online articles about 5 years ago, and have consistently come

back to them as I work through Complex PTSD with a wonderful therapist. Your words are sturdy and compassionate and direct and I now find life worth living again. P.S. I keep a copy of 13 Steps/Flashback in my purse. — P.B.

This is and will always be a historic day in my life; simply from stumbling onto your articles. Twelve years of huge wastes of treatment time suffering. You've nailed it. I'm talking van der Kolk could learn from you. I've always hated the psych chatter of how great it is to be able to put a name to this or that or blah, blah. But I stand converted. It is absolutely a miracle to know emotional flashbacks 'fit' the 'thing'. — M.

I've read your articles many many times. Particularly on abandonment depression, you have given me hope to refrain from committing suicide. Thank you so much for taking the time to write these exceptional articles on the internet. I cannot thank you enough. — T.M., N. Ireland

I just finished your book. It is powerful and gentle. I am starting your book over now and am using a highlighter as I go through it again. You invite the reader into a warm therapeutic relationship as you write. A beautiful, beautiful book! Thank you — A. R.

I wanted to thank you for sharing your work on your website. It was exactly what I needed to get an area of my life unstuck! Your work is insightful,

your suggestions are doable, and most importantly they resulted in achieving the gentle shifts most needed to change my life. — L.K.

Your articles have offered more insight and hope to me as a CPTSD sufferer, than any other, and I am grateful for this and would like to share this knowledge with others. Please could we have permission to publish [your articles on www.ptsdforum.org](http://www.ptsdforum.org).

Reading your article was like the clouds clearing up and the sun coming out. I'm not crazy, I'm not stupid, I'm not broken forever. I just have emotional flashbacks and *it's not my fault*. — M.L.

I've never read something that helped me gain such personal insight and clarity to my own life experience. After years of working with coaches, healers, and therapists, I've never been able to 'pinpoint' what exactly was happening in my own internal processing. I never clearly fit in any 'box' or diagnosis... that is, until now. It is such a relief to read these articles and know that what I struggle with 'makes sense' based on my difficult life (and childhood) experiences. And it's an even greater relief to recognize that there are ways to approach and manage this in a positive way. — R.T.

I don't think it would be an understatement to tell you that your work has possibly saved my life as well as my fiancé's life. We both have complex PTSD and had both pretty much given up on life. Your material has allowed

us to understand what is happening to us. It has really opened my eyes. —

M. M.

You are a gift to me and thousands of people who have suffered like me and who struggle to find their anger (it's coming!), self-protection, self-sorrowing, growth. I am re-building, re-parenting myself. — L.K., U.K.

I just re-read your book and underlined almost the whole thing. I have gotten so much from your web-site and now the book. Three years plus into therapy, I am amazed at how much I have changed. It blows my mind when I read the fawning stuff now, and realize that I don't really do that anymore. — A.

I have been to counseling, psychologists, psychiatrists, spiritual help, you name it; I have tried it. I have many self-help books and online resources. They all give me some helpful information, but, your article gave me more than anything ever has. — J. T.

I have been working in the field of counseling education for 12 years, and I can honestly say, I have never found information and theory such as this before. — C.M., Asst. Professor of Counseling Psychology

I felt compelled to write and thank you for your article on complex PTSD. Reading it has for the first time allowed me to cry real tears from the depths of my body for the pain and loss I experienced on my life journey so far. —



M.

**COMPLEX PTSD: FROM  
SURVIVING TO THRIVING**

**Pete Walker**

**COMPLEX PTSD: FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING**

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**DEDICATION**

To my wife, Sara Weinberg. To my son, Jaden Michael Walker.

You both show me on a daily basis that I have escaped my parents' legacy of contempt, that I can nurture our family with love and kindness and that I am ongoingly healed by the love and kindness that you generously shower upon me.

I also dedicate this book to those who on a regular basis were verbally and

emotionally abused at the dinner table, and I pray that this book will help you heal any damage that was done to you and your relationship with food.

And the day came

When the risk to remain

Closed tightly in a bud

Became more painful

Than the risk it took

To Blossom

— Anonymous

When inward tenderness

Finds the secret hurt,

Pain itself will crack the rock

And, Ah! Let the soul emerge.

— Rumi

We are all of us exceedingly complex creatures and do ourselves a service in regarding ourselves as complex.

Otherwise, we live in a dream world of nonexistent, simplistic black-and-white notions which simply do not apply to life.

— Theodore Rubin

# **COMPLEX PTSD:**

## FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to all my lovely clients who, over the last three decades, honored me with their brave vulnerability and authenticity. Their stories verified to me that there is an epidemic of poor parenting, and their inspiring work proved to me that the effects of it could be largely overcome.

I am also grateful to the readers of my first book and to my website respondents whose generous feedback greatly alleviated my performance anxiety about writing another book and putting my words out there for public viewing. Their overwhelmingly positive support ameliorates the fear that my words will be used as weapons against me as they so often were in childhood.



I am grateful to my good friend Bill O'Brien who gave me invaluable editorial assistance.

I am grateful to all those writers listed in the Bibliography, and those unlisted, whose ideas have fertilized my mind and helped me to write this book.

I am grateful to my friends in recovery with whom I have shared the process of mutual commiseration. We have aided each other greatly in our journeys of recovery.

## **DISCLAIMER**

I am not an academic expert on Complex PTSD [Cptsd]. I have read and studied a great deal, but by no means exhaustively, and I do not make it a point to religiously keep up with all the latest developments. What I bring to the table here is almost 30 years of treating trauma survivors in individual and group settings. What I describe here is a pragmatic, multidimensional approach to recovering based on what I have seen work with my clients, my loved ones and myself.

## **INTRODUCTION**

If you're in immediate distress, please turn to [chapter 8](#), and read the list of 13 steps for reducing Cptsd fear and stress.

Forty years ago, I was riding on a train in India travelling from Delhi to

Calcutta. I was at the end of a failed, yearlong spiritual quest in India.

Instead of enlightenment, my salvation fantasy had only netted me despair and amoebic dysentery. The latter cost me thirty pounds of flesh, and left me looking like an emaciated monk.

Even worse was the absolute loss of the hope that had been inflamed by reading Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road." This hope had supported me through five years of world travel after I was unceremoniously kicked out of my family home.

But, back to the train. I was sitting in my cramped second class seat with the untouchables, chickens and goats, reading an English version of an Indian newspaper. The paper informed me that my destination, Calcutta, was now inundated with 100,000 refugees from Bangladesh who had just fled their flood-swamped homes. They were all apparently sleeping on the downtown streets in the recesses beneath the protruding second floors of all the buildings that lined the streets.

I came in late at night and sure enough, sleeping bodies wrapped in sheets, shoulder to shoulder, lined the streets everywhere. I checked into a twenty cents-a-night hotel that a fellow traveler had told me about. I slept unevenly, dreading the sight that I would behold the next morning. How would I handle viewing masses of desperate people, especially when I had

nothing to give? I doubted that I even had enough money to make it to Australia where I could hopefully replenish my wallet.

When I finally nudged myself down the stairs late the next morning, I was aghast at the transformed scene on the streets. Sheets had been spread out like picnic blankets and each hosted happy families. Little portable stoves produced meals and cups of tea. People bantered with incredible vitality and enthusiasm, and children...children [this was the part that emblazoned on my memory] crawled all over their parents, especially their fathers in affectionate playful gymnastics that their fathers seemed to love as much as they did.

I was flooded with a *mélange* of feelings unlike anything I'd ever experienced before - a strange cocktail of relief, delight and anxiety. The anxiety I wouldn't understand until ten years later when I realized that envy had been percolating below the surface of my awareness.

I was deeply envious of this gorgeous buffet of familial love that I had never experienced or even witnessed before. The family sitcoms – even the syrupy sweet ones - that I had watched growing up came nowhere near creating such an authentic, tactile representation of healthy bonding and attachment.

When I realized what this was years later as an anthropology and social

work student, I positively flashed back to other non-industrial countries where I had seen similar scenes on a less grand level: Morocco, Thailand, Bali, and an Aboriginal reserve in Australia.

These memories also viscerally informed me about the kind of relational love I had never seen in my own or my friends' families. As I digested this experience over the years and used it to overcome my denial about what I had missed out on as a child, I began the decades long quest that has lead me to write this book as well as *The Tao of Fully Feeling*, which precedes it. The Tao of Fully Feeling is a companion to this book and elaborates many of the foundational principles of this book.

This book then is my hopeful effort to create a map that you can follow to heal the wounds that come from not enough childhood love. If I am a bit repetitive at times about issues like shrinking the critic and grieving the losses of childhood, it is my attempt to find different ways to emphasize the great importance of engaging these themes of recovery work over and over again. If you find yourself lost and not sure of how to get back onto the map, these themes will always be key portals for reentry.



I sometimes recommend that readers view the table of contents and start

with whatever headings most strike a chord. Although the book is laid out in a somewhat linear fashion, everyone's journey of recovering is different, and journeys can be initiated in a variety of ways.

Journeys of recovering may begin when a death or great loss brings up an emotional storm that opens up a hidden reservoir of childhood pain; or when a friend shares something about his or her recovery process that strikes a chord; or when a book or TV show triggers a more serious consideration of what really happened in childhood; or when something gets "opened up" in couple's therapy; or when a healing crisis in the form of panic attacks or a nervous breakdown requires some outside help; or when the self-medicating strategies developed to soothe depression and anxiety get out of control and also require outside help.

I hope that readers will be able to use this book as a textbook for recovering, and that certain sections will call you back or forward to them repeatedly, as over time and with effective work, certain themes continue to take on ever deepening meaning.

In this vein, you will find that the Table of Contents is quite comprehensive, and sometimes the best way to use this book is to browse through it and then read the sections and chapters that most capture your interest.

Moreover, this is not a one size fits all formula for recovering.

Depending on the specific pattern of your childhood trauma, some of the advice contained herein may be less relevant or even irrelevant to you.

Please then focus on the material that seems applicable and helpful to you.

I also hope this map will guide you to heal in a way that helps you become an unflinching source of kindness and self-compassion for yourself, and that out of that journey you will find at least one other human being who will reciprocally love you well enough in that way.

Finally I have illustrated this work with many real life examples. All names and identifying information have been changed to protect client confidentiality.

## **PART 1**

### **AN OVERVIEW OF RECOVERING**

# 1 CHAPTER

## THE JOURNEY OF RECOVERING FROM CPTSD

I wrote this book from the perspective of someone who has Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [Cptsd], and who has experienced a great reduction of symptoms over the years. I also wrote it from the viewpoint of someone who has discovered many silver linings in the long, windy, bumpy road of recovering from Cptsd. I have also seen this type of recovering in a number of my friends and many long term clients.

First, the good news about Cptsd. It is a learned set of responses, and a failure to complete numerous important developmental tasks. This means

that it is environmentally, not genetically, caused. In other words, unlike most of the diagnoses it is confused with, it is neither inborn nor characterological. As such, it is learned. It is not inscribed in your DNA. It is a disorder caused by nurture [or rather the lack of it] not nature.

This is especially good news because what is learned can be unlearned and vice versa. What was not provided by your parents can now be provided by yourself and others.

Recovery from Cptsd typically has important self-help and relational components. The relational piece can come from authors, friends, partners, teachers, therapists, therapeutic groups or any combination of these. I like to call this *reparenting by committee*.



I must emphasize, however, that some survivors of Cptsdengendering families were so thoroughly betrayed by their parents, that it may be a long time, if ever, before they can trust another human being enough to engage in relational healing work. When this is the case, pets, books and online therapeutic websites can provide significant relational healing.

This book describes a multimodal treatment approach to Cptsd. It is oriented toward the most prevalent kind of Cptsd, the kind that comes from growing up in a severely abusive and/or neglectful family. In this vein, the



book describes a journey of healing the damage that occurs when you suffer traumatizing abuse and abandonment. Traumatizing abuse and abandonment can occur on verbal, emotional, spiritual, and/or physical levels. Moreover, sexual abuse is especially traumatizing.

I believe that we have an epidemic of traumatizing families. Current estimates posit that one in three girls and one in five boys are sexually abused before they enter adulthood, and recent statistics from The Kim Foundation report that 26% of Americans over 18 have been diagnosed with a mental disorder.

When abuse or neglect is severe enough, any one category of it can cause the child to develop Cptsd. This is true even in the case of emotional neglect if both parents collude in it, as we will see in [chapter 5](#). When abuse and neglect is multidimensional, the severity of the Cptsd worsens accordingly.

### **Definition Of Complex PTSD**

Cptsd is a more severe form of Post-traumatic stress disorder. It is delineated from this better known trauma syndrome by five of its most common and troublesome features: emotional flashbacks, toxic shame, self-abandonment, a vicious inner critic and social anxiety.

*Emotional flashbacks* are perhaps the most noticeable and characteristic

feature of Cptsd. Survivors of traumatizing abandonment are extremely susceptible to painful emotional flashbacks, which unlike PTSD do not typically have a visual component.

Emotional flashbacks are sudden and often prolonged regressions to the overwhelming feeling-states of being an abused/abandoned child. These

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feeling states can include overwhelming fear, shame, alienation, rage, grief and depression. They also include unnecessary triggering of our fight/flight instincts.

It is important to state here that emotional flashbacks, like most things in life, are not all-or-none. Flashbacks can range in intensity from subtle to horrific. They can also vary in duration ranging from moments to weeks on end where they devolve into what many therapists call a regression.

Finally, a more clinical and extensive definition of Cptsd can be found on p. 121 of Judith Herman's seminal book, *Trauma and Recovery*.

### **An Example Of An Emotional Flashback**

As I write this I recall the first emotional flashback I was ever able to identify, although I did not identify it until about ten years after it occurred. At the time of the event, I was living with my first serious partner. The honeymoon phase of our relationship came to a screeching halt when she

unexpectedly started yelling at me for something I no longer recall.

What I do most vividly recall was how the yelling felt. It felt like a fierce hot wind. I felt like I was being blown away – like my insides were being blown out, as a flame on a candle is blown out.

Later, when I first heard about auras, I flashed back to this and felt like my aura had been completely stripped from me.

At the time itself, I also felt completely disoriented, unable to speak, respond or even think. I felt terrified, shaky and very little. Somehow, I finally managed to totter to the door and get out of the house where I eventually slowly pulled myself together.

As I said earlier, it took me ten years to figure out that this confusing and disturbing phenomenon was an intense emotional flashback. Some years later, I came to understand the nature of this type of regression. I realized it was a flashback to the hundreds of times my mother, in full homicidal visage, blasted me with her rage into terror, shame, dissociation and helplessness.

Emotional flashbacks are also accompanied by intense arousals of the fight/flight instinct, along with hyperarousal of the sympathetic nervous system, the half of the nervous system that controls arousal and activation.



When fear is the dominant emotion in a flashback the person feels extremely anxious, panicky or even suicidal. When despair predominates, a sense of profound numbness, paralysis and desperation to hide may occur. A sense of feeling small, young, fragile, powerless and helpless is also commonly experienced in an emotional flashback, and all symptoms are typically overlaid with humiliating and crushing toxic shame.

### **Toxic Shame: The Veneer Of An Emotional Flashback**

*Toxic shame*, explored enlighteningly by John Bradshaw in *Healing The Shame That Binds*, obliterates a Cptsd survivor's self-esteem with an overwhelming sense that he is loathsome, ugly, stupid, or fatally flawed. Overwhelming self-disdain is typically a flashback to the way he felt when suffering the contempt and visual skewering of his traumatizing parent. Toxic shame can also be created by constant parental neglect and rejection. Early in my career I worked with David, a handsome, intelligent man who was a professional actor. One day David came to see me after an unsuccessful audition. Beside himself, he burst out: "I never let on to anyone, but I know that I'm really very ugly. It is so stupid that I'm trying to be an actor when I'm so painful to look at." I will never forget how shocked and disbelieving I felt at first, that such a handsome person could feel ugly, but further exploration brought me understanding.

David's childhood was characterized by broad spectrum abuse and neglect. He was the last and unwanted child of a large family, and his alcoholic father repeatedly attacked and looked at him with disgust. To make matters worse, his family imitated his father and frequently humiliated him with heavy doses of contempt. His older brother's favorite gibe, accompanied by a nauseated grimace, was "I can't stand sight of you. You make me want to vomit!"

Toxic shame *can* obliterate your self-esteem in the blink of an eye. In an emotional flashback you can regress instantly into feeling and thinking that you are as worthless and contemptible as your family perceived you. When you are stranded in a flashback, toxic shame devolves into the intensely painful alienation of the abandonment *mélange* - a roiling morass of shame, fear and depression.



The *abandonment mélange* is the fear and toxic shame that surrounds and interacts with the abandonment depression. The *abandonment depression* itself is the deadened feeling of helplessness and hopelessness that afflicts traumatized children.

Toxic shame also inhibits us from seeking comfort and support. In a

reenactment of the childhood abandonment we are flashing back to, we often isolate ourselves and helplessly surrender to an overwhelming feeling of humiliation.

If you are stuck viewing yourself as worthless, defective, or despicable, you are probably in an emotional flashback. This is typically also true when you are lost in self-hate and virulent self-criticism. Immediate help for managing emotional flashbacks can be found at the beginning of [chapter 8](#) which lists 13 practical steps for resolving flashbacks.

Numerous clients and respondents to my website tell me that the concept of *emotional flashback* brings them a great sense of relief. They report that for the first time they are able to make some sense of their troubled lives. A common comment has been “Now I understand why all the psychological and spiritual approaches I have pursued had so few answers for me.” Many also note feeling freed from a shaming list of misdiagnoses that have been given to them by themselves or others. This in turn has aided them in ridding themselves of the self-destructive habit of amassing evidence of their own defectiveness or craziness. Many also report a quantum leap in their motivation to challenge the learned habits of self-hate and self-disgust.

### **List Of Common Cptsd Symptoms**

Survivors may not experience all of these. Varying combinations are

common. Factors affecting this are your 4F type and your childhood abuse/neglect pattern.

Emotional Flashbacks

Tyrannical Inner &/or Outer Critic

Toxic Shame

Self-Abandonment

Social anxiety

Abject feelings of loneliness and abandonment

Fragile Self-esteem

Attachment disorder

Developmental Arrests

Relationship difficulties

Radical mood vacillations [e.g., pseudo-cyclothymia: see [chapter 12](#)]

Dissociation via distracting activities or mental processes

Hair-triggered fight/flight response

Oversensitivity to stressful situations

Suicidal Ideation

### **Suicidal Ideation**

*Suicidal ideation* is a common phenomenon in Cptsd, particularly during intense or prolonged flashbacks. Suicidal ideation is depressed thinking or

fantasizing about wanting to die. It can range from active suicidality to passive suicidality.

*Passive suicidality* is far more common with the Cptsd survivors who I have known, and it ranges from wishing you were dead to fantasizing about ways to end your life. When lost in suicidal ideation, the survivor may even pray to be delivered from this life, or fantasize about being taken by some calamitous act of fate. He may even think or obsess - without being serious - of stepping in front of a car or jumping off a building.

Fantasy typically ends, however, without a serious intent to kill yourself. This is as opposed to active suicidality where the person is actively proceeding in the direction of taking her life.

I am discussing passive suicidality because it does not merit the same kind of alarm as active suicidality. Passive suicidality is typically a flashback to early childhood when our abandonment was so profound, that it was natural for us to wish that God or somebody or something would just put an end to it all.

When the survivor catches himself in a suicidal reverie, he will benefit from seeing it both as an emblem of how much pain he is in, and as a sign of a particularly intense flashback. This then can direct him to use the flashback management steps in [chapter 8](#).