

19 FEBRUARY 2020



Illustration by: Cynthia

# Why Trauma Survivors Can't Just "Let It Go"

## **"Make it stop. I just want it to stop!" I begged my therapist.**

I remembered my psychologist looking at me patiently, her eyes telling me she was empathetic but even she perhaps didn't know what to say to make me feel better. I knew the truth was it wasn't going to be that easy to stop everything that was bothering me; well at least that's what I've learnt going for therapy for as long as I can remember. But at that moment, I was already losing sleep for two weeks, the nightmares were back, haunting me both in my sleep and in reality too, it was getting harder and harder to separate what was present and past. I wasn't just emotionally and mentally tired, I was also physically drained and it was starting to affect my daily routines, once again.

*"Sometimes I just wish that I can just let it go, you know? Whats wrong with me? It happened so many years ago! Why can't I do it? I feel like I'm such a loser!"* I blurted out to her.

My psychologist nodded her head and a small reassuring smile started to form on her face. Whenever that happens, I knew she was going to tell me the truth whether or not I was ready for it.

She said gently, "*Because it happened. And it affected you inside greatly. Not all things are that easy to let go of and not all things you can let go of at all. Someone shoving you in the train and you getting mad about it for the whole day versus years of endured trauma is not the same when it comes to telling someone to simply let it go.*"

What she said stuck with me for a long time. It left me conflicted because in my faith, I was brought up to believe that letting go of any negative emotions and feelings was the only way to move forward and attain a peaceful life. I was desperate to be close to my Creator yet it was a constant uphill battle trying to understand why things happen the way they did and learning to pick up the pieces after. I learned much later in life that while being in a state of peace was something all of us should strive for, refusing to acknowledge that there will be (sometimes painful) lessons along the way to teach you so that you would value and appreciate peace as a blessing; and as long as you've not learn those lessons, the tests will continue to reappear in your life in various forms, there are absolutely no shortcuts to it. You just can't understand peace if you are not willing to face the storm head on and brave through it till the end. You can't just expect to be at peace by telling yourself or someone else to forget all the things that brought them pain and deep sorrow in their lives. I wish it was that simple. I really do.

Things would turn out different for many of us if the bad things didn't happen, for sure. But for trauma survivors, something in them had already changed from the moment it happened. For some, a part of them died, they never got back to who they were before while for others, they never looked at the world and people the same way again.

When I reflect back on why we expect ourselves and others to simply "let it go" without understanding that there are complexities in real life situations or in my case, undoing the twelve years of damage that my body has suffered through the physical abuse, I turn to social and cultural conventional 'wisdom' and find the culprit right away. We see it everywhere on the internet, the growing number of wellness workshops and even your trusty good friend who just wants to 'cheer you up' (God, bless her soul!); they tells us to adopt a "positive" mindset and to rid anything that no longer serves you in a beneficial way. They mean well too, I'm sure of this.

I remember going through a phase of reading countless self-help books, followed various life coaches both online and offline teaching me their principles, strategies and life hacks. It was encouraging and it probably has worked for them and other people out there, yet for many survivors of trauma and abuse, more often the words "*positive*" and "*be happy*" sounds a lot like fluff and leaves you even more confused, alone and broken inside.

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Between consuming all these "positive" energy and wealth of information, hoping that I could emerge a better person out of what I experienced as a child, I was left instead with an overwhelming amount of guilt and shame. I felt like it was my fault, like I wasn't trying hard enough. I felt completely alone.

I decided since then to take a step back and seek to understand more about my diagnosis, relearning to accept my body once again, reading plenty of research both from written articles from trained doctors, the ever reliable Quran (that often gets misinterpreted by people and conveniently used against trauma survivors to guilt them when really, we're often told by people only 1/4 of the whole story!) and my psychologist, I started to realize a few things when it came to the concept of letting go.

Firstly, let's understand that trauma survivors are people who have gone through a deeply distressing and disturbing experience in their lives. These experiences are not limited to abuse. There are people who go through traumatic experiences such as loss, divorce, natural disasters, war, bullying, witnessing violence and many more. What is traumatic to a person is also unique and personal. It all depends on our own unique thresholds. What is traumatic to you may not be traumatic for another person. Also, each of us respond differently to trauma even if it seems like the trauma is similar.

A myth we commonly hear when it comes to overcoming trauma is that survivors are weak, sour and angry at the world. I found this to be untrue though it may seem at the surface. In fact, trauma survivors are one of the most highly motivated people I know. We're sensitive to our surroundings because we've lived our lives being hyper vigilant for our survival. We're "over achievers" and hard on ourselves because we know how it feels like to hit rock bottom and stay there for a long time. We're not vengeful, we just want to be heard and sometimes we just want someone to say, "I believe you" . We don't seek pity but we just want to be allowed to cry and be upset when we think about the things that happened to us. We never want you to shoulder our burdens because we know it's ours to fix but that doesn't mean that we always want to do it all alone, or that we're stubborn or strong. We wish often to erase those painful and scary memories, but we know that will never happen in this lifetime, and we learn that the things that happened never defined us but instead played a part in creating who we choose to be today.

How then do people who have gone through trauma, continue to live their lives purposefully, meaningfully, whatever it means to them?

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Trauma survivors do move on with their lives even though it may seem a little less perfect with a few voids here and there. Understanding that trauma are like fragments of memories that are locked all over your body and subconscious mind therefore as long as we're not willing and avoid to find the keys or create the keys to open those locked fragments, we'll never get around realizing that we're more than what happened to us. And when we embrace those ugly and uncomfortable parts of us, then do we get a chance to experience the beauty of life as well, which ALL of us are deserving of.

Approaching recovery from trauma as something that requires a whole life's work is a more healthier and sustainable approach rather than guilt tripping ourselves and others with unrealistic expectations and beliefs. We must know that sometimes what we see are ideals, and ideals take a lot of work, time, compassion and effort. You must know you are allowed to take as much time you need. Be kind to yourself because you've already gone through so much. Rest when you're tired, it's alright.

We don't always understand the wisdom behind why things happen. Sure, we all want to be happy, but we don't need to force ourselves to thinking we are when we know we've got skeletons in the closet to confront with. Sure, we want to let it go, but letting go doesn't have a deadline because it may sometimes come back to visit us every now and then; maybe you saw something, heard something, smelt something that reminded you of what happened to you. And when you find yourselves breaking or broken, don't believe it when they or you tell yourself you're weak. You're not. You living and trying your best every day, is you no longer allowing the past to define who you are. You may need a lifetime to process what happened but you're coming into you in that process too, you are who you are because of the choices you choose to make. And we can only make the best choice we know now. That will be enough. As long as you're trying and I believe you when you say you are, even when you feel like you're still stuck and shackled in a dark hole, even when you find yourself revisiting and reliving the painful past, you are enough. You are enough in your Creator's Eyes and will be seen for your sincere efforts through the tests He has chosen for you, that He trusts you with, His mighty soldier.

The next time you're going through a hard time, instead of telling yourself "let it go" tell yourself, "I'm working on myself and I will do so layer by layer"

The next time you see someone going through a hard time, instead of telling them "let it go", ask them if you can hug them or hold their hand, let them know "There's no rush. I'm here for you"

X,  
Asha