

7 Lessons I Learned from “The Body Keeps the Score”

“The Body Keeps the Score” is written by trauma expert Dr. Bessel van der Kolk. The book cites scientific research and case studies that illustrate every aspect of trauma. Dr. Bessel van der Kolk offers traditional and alternative treatments to trauma in order to heal the mind and the body.

1. Traumatized people look at the world in a fundamentally different way from other people. A disgruntled man at the grocery store is just cranky to most people, but to a survivor that man appears to be ready to raise his fist.
Tip: Don’t take things personally.
2. Traumatized people often have difficulty talking about what has happened to them.
Tip: Suggest free writing: Have the individual write the first thing that comes to their mind as they look at a random object. Tell them to keep writing without stopping, rereading, or crossing out excerpts.
3. The Brain-body connection is real. The heart, guts, and brain communicate.
Tip: Drug addiction and self-injurious behavior starts as attempts to cope with the physical pain of our emotions. Suspend your judgement when you encounter drug addicts, alcoholics, and other individuals suffering from mental health problems.
4. People experience trauma differently. You will encounter survivors who will talk openly about the trauma and some who stay quiet. Some will cry, others will laugh.
Tip: There is no such thing as a normal when it comes to trauma. Avoid using phrases like “That’s not normal.”
5. The key to recovery is self-awareness.
Tip: Starting with pleasant or neutral sensations, encourage trauma victims to notice and label these feelings before developing tolerance for painful and difficult sensations.
6. Positive relationships are fundamental for well-being and mental health.
Tip: Refer individuals to groups and encourage them to stay connected with family and friends. When other relationships don’t exist, trust that your relationship and your presence matters. Therapy can be especially important in these cases.
7. You can regulate your own physiology through basic activities such as breathing, moving, and touching.
Tip: This lesson is for the victim AND you. Self-care is important.

A., Van der Kolk Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books, 2015.