

# The Trauma of Being Unprotected

When Safety and Relationship Collide



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## Not all trauma comes from what happened.

Some of it comes from what **didn't** happen when it mattered most.

Someone should have stepped in.

Someone should have believed you.

Someone should have stopped it.

And no one did.

That absence leaves a different kind of mark on the nervous system—one that is often misunderstood, minimized, or misclassified.

## Trauma is not just fear or pain

We often define trauma as exposure to overwhelming threat.

But that definition misses a large category of lived experience, especially in childhood.

Many people were not exposed to extreme danger.

They were exposed to **unresolved unfairness inside relationships they depended on.**

They were:

- hurt and told to be quiet
- blamed instead of protected
- dismissed instead of believed
- punished for reacting
- asked to forgive prematurely
- left to manage conflict alone

The threat wasn't just the event.

The threat was **having no viable strategy**.

## **When two safety systems give opposite instructions**

Humans experience safety through more than one channel.

AUTONOMY DRIVE - scans for:

- danger
- boundary violation
- harm
- unpredictability

ATTACHMENT DRIVE - seeks:

- connection
- belonging
- attachment
- proximity to others

Most of the time, these systems work together.

But in certain moments—especially in childhood—they collide.

A child may experience:

- *“This person is hurting me”*  
and at the same time
- *“This person is who I need to stay safe.”*

There is no winning move here.

If the child reacts to danger, they risk losing connection.

If the child preserves connection, they must override their instincts.

This is not a choice.

It is a **forced contradiction**.

## **Why this creates a unique form of trauma**

When safety and relationship are aligned, distress resolves.

When they are in conflict, the system can't close the loop.

The nervous system remains activated because:

- the threat was not neutralized
- the danger came from within the attachment field
- the child could not escape or confront
- no external protection arrived

Even if the child survives emotionally, adapts behaviorally, or learns coping strategies, the body retains the original uncertainty:

*What do I do when the person I need is also the source of danger?*

That question doesn't go away.

It becomes a template.

## How this shows up later

Adults who carry this kind of trauma often describe:

- intense reactions to unfairness
- difficulty tolerating neutrality
- heightened sensitivity to being believed
- confusion between disagreement and betrayal
- oscillation between people-pleasing and withdrawal
- chronic self-doubt around their own perceptions
- exhaustion in relationships
- a feeling that conflict is catastrophic

These are not personality traits.

They are **adaptive strategies** formed in impossible conditions.

## Why traditional models miss this

Many trauma frameworks focus on:

- fear conditioning
- threat exposure
- physiological overwhelm

Attachment models focus on:

- closeness
- availability
- emotional responsiveness

But this category of trauma sits **between** those lenses.

The problem was not lack of care *or* lack of safety.

It was the **inability to coordinate them**.

The child needed protection *through* relationship—and didn't get it.

## Children who lose one field or the other

Some children grow up in environments where:

- relationships are emphasized
- danger signals are dismissed
- harmony is prioritized
- instincts are overridden

They learn to abandon their nervous system to preserve connection.

Others grow up where:

- no relational safety exists
- vigilance is required
- self-reliance is necessary
- trust is dangerous

They learn to abandon relationship to preserve safety.

Both adaptations are costly.

Neither reflects the child's nature.

## **This is why unfairness is so charged**

Unfairness reactivates this original contradiction.

It signals:

- someone has power
- something went wrong
- protection is uncertain

And the old question returns:

*Will anyone step in—or am I alone again?*

When the answer is unclear, the body reacts as if the original danger is happening now.

That's not overreaction.

That's memory without language.

## **Naming this matters**

When we treat all trauma as fear-based, we miss the relational dimension.

When we treat all attachment wounds as emotional, we miss the survival stakes.

This kind of trauma forms when:

- harm occurs
- protection is needed

- and relationship is the only available channel

Understanding this doesn't assign blame.

It restores **coherence**.

It explains why some wounds don't heal through insight alone.

Why reassurance doesn't land.

Why safety must be *demonstrated*, not just expressed.

This essay names the problem.

The next one will focus on what actually allows these wounds to heal—especially when the original moment has passed and there is no way to “fix” what happened.

Not forgiveness.

Not acceptance.

Not justice.

Something more precise.



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With warmth,

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Dr. Nicole Mirkin 2d

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This articulated something many people feel but cannot organize into words. The conflict between needing protection and needing connection explains why unfairness, disbelief, or neutrality can feel intolerable rather than merely upsetting. Framing these responses as adaptations to an impossible bind restores dignity to reactions that are often pathologized. This distinction between fear-based trauma and relationally trapped trauma feels essential.



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