

Bringing Hope in the Aftermath of Trauma: Danielle's Story



by ESTHER LIU

We live in an era where people have an increased awareness of the reality and impact of trauma. There is more and more literature on trauma's effects, how to better cope with and manage them, and how to heal. One of the difficulties with the trauma we often encounter in counseling is that it leaves invisible wounds that are easy to overlook. Therefore, the more we understand the varied imprints trauma can leave on a person, the better we will be at recognizing them and the more motivated we will be to learn how Scripture speaks to these struggles. Even though the word *trauma* does not appear in the Bible, we know Scripture is familiar with the depths of suffering and evil. It is not aloof to suffering that endures, to the difficulties of finding hope in brokenness. As biblical counselors, we are given the worthwhile task of mining Scripture to help us understand and orient the struggler, and to come alongside them on the path to healing.

Thus, the premise of this article is that though trauma's aftereffects may stubbornly persist, Scripture offers hope to those who suffer in this way. To begin, I will unpack the keywords I will be using: *trauma*, *after-effects*, and *hope*. Then I will present the story of Danielle using these

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terms as a framework. Last, I will share how various Scripture passages ministered to her and set her on a trajectory of hope.

Trauma, Its Aftereffects, and Hope

First, I will take time to define and explain the keywords that form the basis for this article.

Trauma. There are many definitions of trauma, all with strands in common. It is characterized by an upsetting and painful event or experience—whether onetime or recurring—that overwhelms an individual with fear or helplessness. These distressing events are of an intensity and degree that they result in lasting impacts. Many times, these impacts persist long after the event. Trauma changes people. It is suffering that does not stay in the past; it invades the present.

The aftereffects of trauma. There are varied ways that past suffering enters into present-day experience. With the impact of this prior suffering, in confluence with the flesh, the world, and the devil, trauma survivors may react to certain situations differently than they would have before, and differently than those who have not experienced such a distressing event. These differences can be physiological, mental, emotional, behavioral, or relational, or some combination of these. Other *JBC* articles have highlighted the varied ways that past suffering can change someone in the present.¹ In this article, we are seeking to understand the lived experience of someone who is facing these aftereffects—these unique weaknesses and impairments—that result from trauma.

To begin with, trauma survivors often live with a sense of being “off” or different from others. Consider these examples.

- Imagine a woman who for the past ten years has only been able to fall asleep in the daytime. As she grew up, she endured repeated physical abuse from her father, mostly at night. Now, her anxiety spikes when it gets dark. She is wide awake when everyone else is asleep, and asleep while everyone else is working, socializing, and going about their days.

1. Included in this list: Edward T. Welch, “Trauma and the Body: An Introduction to Three Books” (*JBC* 33:2, 2019); Darby Strickland, “Foundations of Trauma Care for Biblical Counselors” (*JBC* 36:2, 2022); Darby Strickland, “Trauma and Relational Hyper-vigilance” (*JBC* 37:3, 2023); and Todd Stryd, “Psalms 129, 130, and 131: A Framework for Trauma Care” (*JBC* 38:1, 2024).

- Imagine a young man who freezes in terror whenever he hears sounds of people yelling at each other. In his childhood home, yelling often led to objects being smashed and his father's screeching tires as he sped off in his car. To others, raised voices may be tolerable, or a sign of a friendly, passionate debate, but not to him.
- Imagine a woman who was sexually abused as a teenager who decades later continues to struggle with physical intimacy with her husband. To others, sexual intimacy is pleasurable and facilitates a sense of closeness, but not to her.

These examples show that situations that are tolerable or even positive for most people can be sources of extreme distress for trauma survivors. As a result, survivors often spend significant mental and emotional energy trying to manage or avoid these sources of distress, commonly referred to as triggers. It can be especially difficult, then, to function in the same

way and at the same capacity as others. The resulting chronic stress and anxiety can take a toll on physical health, productivity, and relationships. With so much to grapple with, tasks and activities that seem manageable for most people may feel overwhelming for survivors.

Some common sentiments we may hear from these survivors are

- “Why can't I be normal like everyone else?”
- “Why am I so messed up? Broken? Unstable? Dysfunctional?”
- “What is wrong with me?”

This sense of being different and “off” can easily lead to shame—hiding, covering up, pretending. Sometimes strugglers do not even realize that their “differences” are connected to trauma. Regardless of the degree of awareness, a persistent legacy of trauma creeps into present-day life and manifests as a disadvantage, weakness, or impairment that can range from barely perceptible challenges to a chronic sense of feeling debilitated and incapable.

Where hope is needed. In these aftereffects, strugglers commonly face two challenges—a growing sense of isolation and a sense of powerlessness. The reasons for isolation are multifaceted. It could be that their

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The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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