

The Heart of Healing: Mind & Body

Elizabeth Leon - 2025-03-13

INTRODUCTION: We welcomed back Elizabeth Leon as she gave her second talk in our Lenten Series on healing. Once again, we will make use of her beautiful slides which can be found [HERE](#). Elizabeth invited us to be mindful of our own hearts and bodies. She reminded us to be kind and curious with ourselves as we embark on this journey exploring healing in our bodies and in our minds. From last week, she reminded us that we need to place ourselves in the healing gaze of Christ, so He may remind us of what is true. He is always the Healer, and we are always beloved daughters and our role is to surrender to Him. The goal of this series is to have a firm and renewed conviction that *healing is not just possible, it is the promise*. There is nothing the Lord wants more than to heal our hearts for freedom and flourishing. Because we live in a fallen world, there will always be obstacles to flourishing, and this talk will discuss one of those obstacles, and things we can do for ourselves about it.

THREE POINTS:

- 1) Trauma is stored in our bodies. Trauma does not go away until we face it. We need to be aware of the trauma, feel it, and process the impact it has had on us.
- 2) Our minds do the best they can to make sense of trauma. This will usually be a fragmented or distorted version of what really happened. As we try to make sense of a trauma, we can erroneously think “we are the problem.”
- 3) Healing is not just possible, it is the promise! Our bodies are a gift from God and we can be grateful for them and love them.

Part of the work of healing is diving deeper into the reality of our harmful experiences and how we have internalized them in our minds and stored them in our bodies. There are two main obstacles to freedom and flourishing that affect the mind and the body — trauma and the enemy. The next talk will focus more on the enemy. Much of the content from this talk comes from work Elizabeth has done with [De Yarrison](#), an expert on walking with women through healing and trauma in the body and mind.

TRAUMA: On slide 4, Elizabeth gives a detailed definition of trauma. It is an experience that impacts mind, body and spirit. Trauma can be the presence of something harmful or the absence of something we needed. Trauma is not only the experience itself, but also our response to it. Absence can be the lack of attachment to a caring and present primary caregiver, or the absence of consistent loving affection from a mother or a father, or the absence of someone delighting in us. Trauma can occur when the things we needed to thrive were missing. Trauma can also be the presence of something harmful: violence, an accident, addiction, upheaval of security, manipulation, assault; physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Trauma can be “big T” items such as those just listed. Or trauma can be “little T” items, smaller events that appear minor on the surface, that occur in patterns over and over again and impact us over time.

All trauma impacts our mind, body and spirit because when we were wounded, we were not safe. Healing requires a restoration of that interior safety, and our ability to be present in our mind and body. Healing from trauma means moving from a state of hyper-vigilance to a state of rest, where rest is calm, peace, well-being, and restoration. If we live with a sense of failure, danger, stress, anxiety, blame, shame or the impact of abuse, we must remember that we are not the problem. There is a problem, but it is not us, it is what happened to us, and how we made sense of it in order to survive.

OUR BRAIN: Healing in our minds and bodies starts with our brains. We all have God-given alarm systems in our bodies that mobilize appropriately when it is time to keep us safe and protect us from danger. They are meant to activate us to find safety, and then turn off when the danger has passed, and allow our bodies to return to a state of calm and rest. If we were not safe, or the danger did not pass, then our bodies would stay in a persistent state of hyper-vigilance, of trying to ward off danger, or hold everything together and not fall apart. When our bodies stay in this reactive state, we eventually adapt to it. Resilience is adapting to our situation, but this “new normal” is often unhealthy and can be toxic for our bodies. The chemicals that our bodies release when danger is sensed can cause many health problems if they remain present over long periods of time. Resilience allows us to adapt to this state of constant high alert. As we adapt to living on high alert, we also create negative patterns in our minds in how we think about ourselves, in how we respond to others, and in how we inhabit our bodies, or try to escape our bodies. Then we begin to experience fear, stress, anxiety and alarm on a regular basis, and we were not meant to live this way. At this point, Elizabeth wanted us to know that not all trauma necessarily becomes traumatizing.

BRAIN SCIENCE: Slide 6 is a picture of the brain highlighting the amygdala, the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus. The reptilian brain, the lowest part of the brain stem, is fully formed when we are born. The reptilian brain is responsible for instinct and survival. Above the reptilian brain is the limbic system. The limbic system which is our emotional nervous system, is not fully formed until our early teens. It is constantly monitoring input from the environment, taking all the data coming in through our senses and trying to decide if it is safe or dangerous. It is going to give signals to our bodies. The system is shaped and developed in accordance to our earliest life experiences. The first three years are critical to a child’s upbringing. If a baby feels secure and loved and their needs are met, then they will develop a sense of safety and security in their limbic system. That idea of safety and freedom will be a part of their personality. In contrast, if a child is not attended to, not well cared for, left to cry or harmed, then that child’s limbic system develops with a sense of fear or abandonment and danger and then they move through the world internalizing this idea of being in danger.

But this is not the end of the story. God gave us the gift of neuroplasticity, the ability of the brain to change and adapt its structure and function throughout life. Those first 3 years do not have to determine everything. Change can happen. We can reshape and rewire the patterns in our brains with intention and practice. Imagine learning how to tie shoe laces. It is a challenging exercise, but with repetition, it becomes easy & natural. When we learn a new language or play an instrument, practice makes us improve, but if we do not practice, we lose access to these abilities. Similarly, we can rewire our brain and change the impact of trauma. We can heal. There is hope.

Our emotional brain is made up of the reptilian brain and the limbic system, and its primary job is to keep us safe. The front part of the brain is the prefrontal cortex, this is the central processing unit for our brains, and it consists of all the higher functions. It manages and makes sense of emotion, it is the center of rational thought and logic, assessing complex information, thinking through problems, reading emotional cues. Inside of the brain is the amygdala. The amygdala decides if data from the senses is dangerous or safe. It responds more quickly than the prefrontal cortex for better and for worse. For better when we are in truly dangerous situations, it

activates our alarm system and is vital for survival. For worse, when we are not in a truly dangerous situation, but because of prior trauma, it activates the alarm system unnecessarily. The hippocampus is where our memories are stored. The amygdala also gets some information from the hippocampus, helping it respond with the additional input of prior experience.

THE TRAUMA RESPONSE: Based on the information that the hippocampus gives the amygdala, the amygdala sets off the flight, fight, freeze or fawn response. (See slide 7) If we were to encounter a bear, the flight response would make us run, the fight response would make us attack the bear, the freeze response would make us play dead, and the fawn response would make us do whatever is necessary to keep the bear happy. This last option is the worst because in addition to the trauma, there is an added layer of powerlessness, confusion about trying to make the one hurting us happy, which leads to guilt, self-rejection and shame.

Originally, each of the four responses is a way to save our lives. In the present, when that trauma has not been processed and felt and healed, the post-traumatic disruptions are uncomfortable. Our bodies respond as if we are in danger, with physical sensations, and we do not know why. Whenever we have a sudden, spontaneous reaction that feels out of proportion to the event, we know something else is going on in our bodies, it is connected to another story. We can feel anxious, we can feel crazy. To add to the confusion, when the amygdala starts firing, the prefrontal cortex, our center for rational thought, stops working. So in a moment of danger, we are not thinking, we are acting. We may not remember what happened. We lose the ability to speak or speak about it, and the memory becomes fragmented. It was not our fault because our prefrontal cortex was not working. That is the way God made us, so all of our energy and resources can go to survival. But, we have to be mindful so that after trauma we do not add a layer of self-condemnation and rejection and blame.

HEALING IN OUR MIND: For many of us, the experience of harm has created a faulty alarm system. Elizabeth recommended a book by Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk, a respected researcher in the area of trauma and the body, The Body Keeps the Score. She quoted him: "The lingering effect of trauma is that you continue to react to mild stressors as if your life is in danger." Our alarm system is given to us by God, but when unresolved traumas remain stored in our bodies, our alarm system goes off when we do not need it to. The amygdala has hijacked not only our brain, but our whole body, and we have strong reactions without knowing why. We were not meant to live this way. This is not the freedom and the flourishing that the Father created us for. So what do we do? Every person has trauma to some degree, and healing is possible, and it is the promise. Healing is the work of a lifetime. There are some things that we can do in the here and now to help ease any suffering we might be experiencing.

1) **Be self-aware** — In the mind, healing begins with self-awareness. Start to notice, be curious, pay attention to when our response is out of proportion to what the situation warrants, because then we know something else is going on. It is an older story being lived out in our bodies. Avoidance is a primary coping strategy that is not helping us. We may feel better in the moment, but it is not going to help us heal. Rather, we can sit before the Lord & ask Him if there is anything in our bodies that He wants to bring out. Ask God what is true.

2) **Create a climate of interior safety** — "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, **think about these things**" (Phil 4:8-9). We can choose the thoughts we dwell on, thoughts that are good and true and beautiful. We can retrain our brains to have kind, compassionate, accepting, loving thoughts about ourselves. We can remind ourselves that conditions right now are safe. Repetition of kind thoughts in a kind voice can reshape our brains. This is the work of neuroplasticity.

HEALING IN OUR BODY:

1) **Deep breathing and mindfulness** — Deep breathing does help! When the amygdala is going off, part of our survival response is fast, shallow breathing which signals to our body that there is danger. When we intentionally take slow, deep breaths, we are signaling to our body that we are NOT in danger. The prefrontal cortex and the amygdala do not have a good communication channel. When in a trauma response, we cannot talk or think our way out. When we take time to become aware of our physical self and our surroundings, it allows the prefrontal cortex to bring some logic and reasoning to our amygdala.

2) **Bilateral movement** — In trauma, the two hemispheres of the brain do not communicate well with each other. When we use both sides of our bodies together or in opposition, it can bring some soothing to our brains. When we walk, our arms naturally swing in opposition. Crawling, rocking in a chair, swaying, crossing our arms and tapping our shoulders on either side, rubbing our hands together are all examples of bilateral movement. Each of these movements can calm our brains and bodies.

3) **How we sit/stand/move** — Bringing that self-awareness to how we actually move through the world can help in the healing process. What is our posture like when we walk? How do we sit in a chair? What thoughts are connected with how we sit or stand or move? We might not even be aware of them. Notice our own bodies. What can we do to make our bodies feel safer? What do our bodies need? What is one thing that brings our bodies to a place of comfort and rest? We can find an intentional practice to use our bodies and our breath to help communicate to ourselves that we are safe.

CONCLUSION: We are not normally able to accurately make sense of trauma that we have experienced on our own, and how we make sense of it may not be true. "The Truth will set [us] free" (John 8:31)! The heart of the issue is how can we bring truth to the memory or the moment that is still living unresolved in our bodies and needs help. The goal is not fixing the trauma, it is creating safe spaces where our trauma can be processed, where we can begin to explore what the truth is, feel the emotion and bring resolution to it. What helps trauma is being in relationship, having places where people can hear us, hear our stories. The truth is not minimizing or hiding or denying. The truth is what happened and we need to take care of our wounds that we are carrying because of what happened. When we invite the Lord into these memories or these moments, we can look at our trauma through His gaze. We look at it with Him, through the lens of our prefrontal cortex. We can use our own logic, reasoning, compassion, kindness to name what happened, say what is true, visualize the memory and invite the Lord into that exact space to give us what we needed, to say what we needed to hear, for us to say what we did not get to say. We have to bring Jesus in safely to those tender places of memories and moments and let Him use our own brain to speak what is true and renounce the lies, and start to experience some freedom and healing and restoration and resolution. Jesus is never going to change the past, but He changes the impact of the memory. It is hard work, but so filled with hope. Healing with Jesus is not just possible, it is the promise! "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom 12:2)! This is the promise.