

*After Decades of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),
I Know How to Feel Safe*

(A blog post published at blog.speakingfromtriumph.com)

My post-traumatic stress disorder began the first time my mother tried to kill me. It increased after the second time she tried to kill me. After failing to kill me physically, my mother spent the rest of my childhood doing her best to kill me mentally and emotionally. Decades later I finally understood that my mother wanted me dead because I was her second daughter instead of her first son.

My PTSD was compounded by the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. If Abraham was willing to kill his son because God told him to, I feared my mother would kill me if other people told her to. And then I became terrified that anyone who didn't like something about me would try to kill me. But after decades of terror that anyone could kill me, I now know how to feel safe. I have a happy ending I never expected.

Murder is a physical and emotional experience. My physical and emotional safety experience — the one that washes away the terror — is listening to the main and end title music from the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird*. To read how I made the discovery of my safety experience and why it is a physical and emotional experience for me, read the Murder Secret Family page at speakingfromtriumph.com. Since I wrote about this in detail on that page, I will not write about it in detail here.

But I will explain what to look for so that other people with PTSD can identify their safety experiences. I have known how to feel safe for only six and a half months as I write this, so I'm still working this out. I will update this post if my understanding improves. I am writing this post now to give other people with PTSD the information I have now so they can start looking for their happy endings. Below are specific steps to take, but first I will explain what I now know about safety experiences.

*Your Safety Experience Will Stand Out in Your Life in Some Way,
Maybe in Many Ways*

I do not remember when I saw *To Kill a Mockingbird* for the first time. I do know that it immediately became my favorite movie. I recorded the movie to my VCR, then later to my DVR. Every time I watched the movie, I made sure to listen to the opening music without distraction. After the movie ended, I kept rewinding so I could listen to the end music repeatedly. If you read or at least skim the Murder Secrets Family page, you will see that I wrote about watching the movie in my journal repeatedly. I even wrote that I identified with the character Boo Radley, but I wanted to be the character Scout (June 12, 1993). Scout survived attempted murder and was able to feel safe again. I survived attempted murder and wanted the ability to feel safe.

Your Safety Experience Will Probably Satisfy a Behavior Style Need

In the DISC behavior system, I am a High I/High S (High I over High S). If you need information about the DISC system, you can download free PDF files from smilesparksuccess.com.

High I people ease stress through socializing with other people. High S people ease stress through quiet activities. High I people are emotionally expressive. High S people are emotionally nonexpressive. I am emotionally expressive when it comes to having fun or telling stories about people who created positive turning points in my life. I can still cry when I tell these stories. One turning point happened in 1981, the other happened in 1996, and I still cry when I talk about them.

When I need to express my deepest emotions, I do so by writing poetry. Writing poetry is a quiet activity. When I need to reassure myself with positive emotions, I do so through music. Listening to the music that represents positive emotions to me is also a quiet activity. Even though I am a High I first and a High S second, I relieve stress and express my deepest emotions through my High S behavior style need for quiet activities.

*Your Safety Experience Will Add More to Your Life
Than Feelings of Safety*

In my first few months of feeling safe every day, my life improved in other ways.

First, I have been doing research for years for various books I'm writing and revising. For all those years, I put the various articles I've collected into boxes and brown paper bags, letting them sit instead of filing them. I kept thinking about filing them, but never had the energy to do it. After about four months of feeling safe, I suddenly started filing the articles. I file at least a few articles everyday. I'm still doing research, but by the time I finish the research everything will be filed. I'll be able to start writing the revisions without further delay.

Second, I now know how to write each book more effectively. I know how to determine the purpose of each chapter, I know how to use just the right amount of information to make the points in each chapter, and I know how to explain what needs explaining. One of the books is based on what I wrote in my journal about therapy and about the clues in my life that helped me recognize my mother's attempts to kill me. That is the most difficult book to write, but now I know how to rewrite it to make it effective.

Third, I feel safe taking actions for myself in ongoing relationships. Taking actions for myself used to feel scary. If my own mother could kill me, anyone else in the world could kill me.

Fourth, I can meet new people without anxiety. When meeting new coworkers or supervisors, I often felt anxious that the person would decide to kill me if they didn't like something about me. I do still have occasions when I have to tell myself that a certain person or a particular group of people is not going to kill me. But I no longer feel anxiety first when I meet people in situations that could bring about PTSD episodes.

Fifth, I have been doing a talk at a conference every year for five or six years. The talk is based on three examples from my own research and how those examples apply to something completely different. For the first several years of the talk, I kept asking myself why I included the first example. It's a good thing none of the participants ever asked me why I included that example because I could not have explained why. I did not *know* why I included that example.

After weeks of feeling safe, I suddenly knew why I included that example. It made perfect sense to me and I could easily explain it. The next time I did that talk, I explained my difficulty understanding why I included that example to my audience. When I told them my new understanding of why I included that example, it made perfect sense to them, too.

Identifying Your Safety Experience

To identify your own safety experience, follow these 5 steps:

Step 1

Identify your High and Secondary High behavior styles. Use the Quick Look pages for behavior styles in my S&R_Keys download from smilesparksuccess.com.

Step 2

Identify your High and Secondary High stress relief needs on the "Behavior Style Keys for Opening Doors to Personal & Professional Success" page of the S&R_Keys download.

Step 3

Figure out if you ease stress through your High or Secondary High behavior style, then identify all the activities that ease your stress.

Step 4

Identify your guiding values using the Quick Look pages in my S&R_Keys download. Rank the remaining values. Read through the values and think about how each value affects your feelings.

Step 5

Identify how you express your deepest emotions. Feeling safe is a deep emotion. If your PTSD is so overwhelming that you cannot identify any feelings of safety, start with any positive emotion you can identify.

I talked about being afraid of my mother in therapy with two different therapists. Neither therapist ever asked what made me feel safe. If they had asked, I would not have been able to answer right away. I would have had to think about it, probably for quite awhile. I wasn't looking for my safety experience when I found it. I was adding different pieces of my favorite music for experiencing feelings to my iPod. I put *Mockingbird* on my iPod thinking I would listen to it occasionally. Instead, I felt a need to listen to it daily. I hadn't even identified the feelings I experienced while listening to *Mockingbird*. I just knew it allowed me to experience feelings I needed to experience. I finally figured out that *Mockingbird* meant safety to me one night while I was listening to it. I was sitting in the dark in my parlor, listening to *Mockingbird* and wondering why I needed to listen to it. I suddenly understood.

My PTSD was part of a terrible secret in my life and in my family. I had to acknowledge feelings of terror before I could acknowledge feelings of safety. It took four decades to acknowledge the feelings of terror. It took another two decades before I learned how to recognize the feelings of safety. But I didn't have anyone helping me recognize my safety experience. If my therapists had asked what made me feel safe, I would have at least started thinking about it. I could have discovered my safety experience sooner if I had had help.

I hope this blog post is enough to get you there sooner.

After You Identify Your Safety Experience

Once you have identified your safety experience, bring that experience into your life as much as possible. At first, I listened to *Mockingbird* on my iPod every evening. Then I started listening to it as I fell asleep. I was sleeping the first time my mother tried to kill me. I woke up to my mother trying to smother me. For decades, I had trouble going to sleep and staying asleep.

I no longer need to listen to *Mockingbird* as I fall asleep if I listen to it during the evening. I listen to *Mockingbird* while reading. I listen to *Mockingbird* in one ear while listening to television with my other ear. I listen to *Mockingbird* on my way to a situation that could bring on the terror. If I feel terror coming on, I get *Mockingbird* playing as quickly as possible. I mostly keep my iPod with me so I have *Mockingbird* with me.

I listen to *Mockingbird* while reading through the book based on my journal. I can read only a few pages at a time, but I started the book years ago and couldn't reread it to finish writing it until I discovered my safety experience.

I listened to *Mockingbird* while writing this blog post.

Each Person with PTSD Has to Identify His or Her Own Safety Experience

I am unable to identify a safety experience for anyone else. Please do not email me with questions because I will not respond. The most I could do is to explain a behavior style stress relief need within the context of a behavior style and guiding value combination. For instance, my situational Harmony value is the reason I use music to experience my deepest feelings. Explaining that kind of context is all I can do for anyone else, but I would do it only during a success coaching session so I have boundaries.

Could Safety Experiences Erase PTSD?

If I listen to *Mockingbird* often enough will it erase my PTSD for good? I don't know. Six and a half months after I started purposefully listening to *Mockingbird* to feel safe, I am experiencing less terror. But I still do experience episodes of terror. I still have to tell myself that a certain person or group is not going to kill me. As I write this, it has been only 19 days since I had to repeatedly reassure myself that no one who signed up for a conference session would try to kill me. Listening to my iPod during the session was obviously out of the question.

That terror episode, however, is an example of another improvement. I was able to talk myself out of the terror. Before I discovered my safety experience, I was able to talk myself out of a terror episode only once, and it took hours. I was staying at a hotel and I was afraid another guest would decide to kill me. I finally convinced myself that the hotel employees would not want anyone to kill me because it would make the hotel look bad. I was able to talk myself out of the terror episode because I was able to identify people who would protect me.

My worst terror episodes lasted for days because I could not talk myself out of them. Sometimes the terror was so real that I didn't know I was in a terror episode for days. Now I recognize terror episodes more quickly. When I can't listen to *Mockingbird* right away, I *can* talk myself out of the terror. Sometimes it still takes hours, but now it can take as little as a few minutes.

Even if I still experience terror episodes for the rest of my life, I do know how to feel safe. Knowing how to feel safe is enough for me. I can have hours of feeling safe every day for the rest of my life. For me, feeling safe for at least part of every day is a happy ending.

If you have PTSD, I hope you find your happy ending.