



## **Into the Forest: Managing Triggers in a Dangerous World**

by Jennifer Young, LMHC, Director of Survivor Services

*“All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them.” ~Galileo Galilei*

Life after a pathological relationship and the resulting trauma is like walking through a forest. It’s a whole new place. In the forest, there are dangerous things and pretty things. You cannot avoid the forest because of the dangerous things...because the pretty things make life worth living. You have to go into the forest. Living life now, with trauma, means that you have to be more aware of where and what the danger is. That’s why the forest metaphor works. You can look around - with open eyes – and see what is dangerous and what is not. Time to open your eyes.

This is really a “how to”. Living with trauma and walking through the forest requires some instruction. You might never have had to walk through the forest before or maybe never realized that you have been in a forest your whole life. You can no longer step outside into the world with your eyes closed or pretending that things do not scare you. This strategy leads to hypervigilance...that place of unknowing. Hypervigilance is a fear of the unknown – eyes closed – unable to see what is coming. That doesn’t work to keep you safe. But to live with trauma means that you become vigilant – eyes open – aware of danger and skills to manage what comes.

Step one: Acknowledge you are in a forest and identify the danger.

The single most important “danger” to recognize is the psychopath himself. Let’s say he’s the wolf that lives in the forest. You have to acknowledge that wolves live in the forest. Don’t step outside onto the path without reminding yourself of that fact. It is what it is. Get your thoughts right about this fact...challenge your denial and the minimizing of that fact. Allow the fear of the wolf to serve as a warning and reminder (because this is the purpose of all emotions). As you correct your thoughts, let that lead to coping strategies that you verbalize to yourself. Create a plan to deal with the wolf that lives in the forest when it shows up. Visualize yourself saving yourself.

*Side note: the greatest weapon to save yourself from a wolf is your running shoes. Be prepared to metaphorically and literally run from the wolf when you see it. A wolf cannot harm you if you are running away or not in his presence at all. You are not avoiding, you are not wimpy, you are saving your life. Buy good running shoes.*

Step two: When you are in the forest, stay present in the forest – eyes open.

You have to stay present and take in each moment. You cannot allow yourself to be distracted by the past or fearful of the future. Safety and beauty are in the here and now. Eyes open, head up, one breath at a time, one foot in front of the other. Take in your surroundings with all of your senses. This level of awareness will allow you to take in the beauty and sense the danger. This level of awareness will allow you to feel the changes in your body, the signals of fear that will give you time to put on those running shoes. Then, when the wolf shows up you will mindfully and with intention get those shoes on and save yourself.

Step three: Seek safety and settle yourself

Run to a safe place...home, a friend, the police. Once there, take off your shoes because you are no longer in danger. Take a moment to intentionally tell yourself that you are safe and that you saved yourself. Be proud that in the forest, when the wolf came, you lived. You are alive and safe so let your breathing slow to a relaxed pace. Use your senses to get present in the safe space you landed.

Three steps to safety, every time. Now, I am sure you are thinking that you cannot literally run away every time. There are times when the wolf knocks at the door to get the kids, or sits across the courtroom or passes you in the hall at work. These times, a metaphorical running away will work. You are not engaging, you are moving in a different direction figuratively...as the wolf seeks to attack and move close you are seeking escape, to end the engagement as quickly as you can. You may not get to run right away...but you are going to run. Your running away comes in the form of not giving him words to manipulate (use as few words as possible when he is around) and not giving him facial expressions to read. Most importantly, no emotional reaction to serve as a sign that his attack has hooked you.

When you begin to see the wolf for what he is...a wolf...your walk through the forest will be different. It will feel safer and you will have taken some of your power back. Being vigilant – with your eyes open – is powerful. When you see what is coming vs. denying or minimizing the danger you will create solutions to keep yourself safe that you never knew you had.

Fear is a very powerful emotion that should never be quieted. It should always be allowed to serve its purpose and keep us safe. But staying afraid and living in fear literally creates the opposite effect, it kills us. It wears your body down, drains you of energy and robs you of your ability to think clearly. Do not stay in fear. Let fear become awareness. Eyes open – you are living in a forest with beautiful trees, plants, sweet smelling flowers and wolves. Go buy some good running shoes and go for a walk.