




From Trauma to  
**RECOVERY**



**D**r. Elizabeth Stanley, a professor at Georgetown University, came to study stress, trauma and resilience through personal experience. She served as a US Army intelligence officer and is the creator of Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT). Her book, "Widen the Window, Training Your Brain to Survive and Thrive During Stress and Recover from Trauma," is a unique blend of personal experience and extensive research and analysis all intended to help people find pathways that lead from negative traumatic experiences to the ability to impact their environment through positive action, wisdom and courage. In this excerpt from a conversation with Lt. Colonel Tim Foley and Jeff McDonald, Stanley offers a fresh perspective and practical suggestions on how to deal with stress, trauma and dysregulation to benefit individuals and society.



**THE WAR CRY:** Your impressive accomplishments and the challenges you have faced culminate in your thorough, well-researched book. How did you arrive at this point?

**DR. STANLEY:** Initially it was a journey to heal myself and then to share all that I learned with others. I've experienced a lot of stress and trauma in my life—childhood adversity, sexual violence, military deployments overseas and a near-death experience while I was in Bosnia. When I got to graduate school, my body was pretty much done because I had spent decades coping with it all. Many of us in our culture have been socialized to cope with it, which is to say, I shoved it under. I pushed it aside, I compartmentalized it, and I kept trying to power through. But that doesn't actually work for our neurobiology. It certainly didn't for mine. Eventually I developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, chronic respiratory illnesses and insomnia. I lost my eyesight for a period of time, and I had Lyme

disease but I didn't know it. It was a big cosmic wake-up call that sent me on a journey to heal myself. I designed a resilience training program and spent over 15 years teaching in different high-stress settings, partnering with neuroscientists to study its effectiveness with troops before combat deployment. In the book, I explore how this kind of inner division can happen to all of us when we've experienced chronic stress and trauma, and when we haven't had enough recovery.

**THE WAR CRY:** As Salvation Army officers, soldiers and personnel rushed to provide relief during the COVID pandemic, learned how to do church differently and responded to forest fires, floods and social unrest, they and those they serve have experienced heightened stress and uncertainty. How can they create anchor points in their lives to get back to a sense of wholeness?

**DR. STANLEY:** One of the reasons why we can end up so depleted and dysregulated is because

we're turning stress on and we're never turning it off. We need to make conscious efforts to help our bodies turn that stress off. We are wired as social animals. Stress, arousal and emotions, especially negative emotions, can be contagious. If we're surrounded by people who are very sad, very anxious, very angry, and we're not mindful of it, we can pick up those emotions and it will resonate in us as well. These are most contagious in relationships between parents and children and romantic partners, but they're also contagious in relationships that involve power differences, such as between teachers and their students, or between Salvation Army personnel and the people they are helping. Compassion helps to block some of that negative distress. When we're in a compassionate state, we've turned on the social bonding hormones that help protect from that contagion.

But when we have been going and going and going, as the officers and people who work for The Salvation Army have been doing, you can end up with compassion fatigue. We need to be careful when we're putting ourselves constantly with people who are in pain, with people who are stressed and traumatized and suffering themselves, and we're not allowing enough time for ourselves to recover. It's helpful to spend time in nature and in loving relationships with people who are well regulated and balanced. It's helpful to get good, restful sleep.

Second, we always have a choice in where we're directing our attention. If we have the unconscious habit of worrying about "what ifs," it turns stress arousal on in us, even if the environment around us is safe and quiet. Becoming aware of how our attention is directed gives us a lot of leverage if we direct our attention to objects that are calming, that are stable. It can be as simple as noticing how your body is in contact with your chair or opening your attention to listen to the natural sounds around you. Knowing that we resonate with our environment, knowing we always have choice with where we direct our attention can protect us from taking on any more stress or trauma.

Sometimes we expect that it's going to require something really big, effortful and time-consuming. From the perspective of our neurobiology, that's not necessarily the case. Everything about the way that our mind and body are wired is the result of repeated experiences. We have lots of repeated experiences with stress that move us toward dysregulation. We have lots of

repeated experiences with dopamine hits that move us toward addiction. The big takeaway from this is that we can set up conscious habits each day. They don't have to take a lot of time, but they do need to happen every day.


In our culture, in general, we don't prioritize enough the very important role of rest, recovery and self-care. It has connotations of selfishness. And if spending a decade doing this research has taught me anything, it's that it's not selfish to intentionally do whatever we choose to keep our own window wide. It gives us so much more capacity to navigate challenges.

The science now shows how beneficial habits have amazing effects on helping to reduce chronic inflammation, feel less lonely, rest better, to experience fewer negative emotions. In our research with combat troops preparing for deployment, after eight weeks of the course, baseline testing showed that while they were going through stressful military combat drills, they used these skills in action. They had better cognitive

performance, better emotion regulation, shifts in their brain patterns that regulate emotions and impulse control. We can make little shifts, little intentional choices, like spending 15 minutes a day experiencing the calming effects of nature or spending 15 minutes a day praying or exercising. Doing these things in repeated ways are going to lead to positive effects in our mind and body.\*

**THE WAR CRY:** Why did you title your book "Widen the Window?"

**DR. STANLEY:** A big part of the book is about the window of tolerance to stress arousal that each of us have. Everybody's window is different. The first pathway for narrowing our window comes from childhood stress, which affects our neurobiological development. It sets our mind and body on a trajectory towards having a narrowed window later in life. The second pathway to narrowing the window is from big shock and traumatic events, like natural disasters, terrorist attacks, combat or rape. The third pathway is chronic stress in everyday life: relational trauma, things like chronic sleep deprivation, caring for an ill family member, being in a relationship that has a lot of tension or having to hide your emotions at work. These things sound mundane, but they can still lead to narrowing our window of tolerance, just like one of those big shock/trauma events.



**"Once we've experienced trauma, our minds and bodies begin to act in ways that we consciously don't understand."**

When our window is narrowed, our thinking brain functions get degraded. We might experience memory problems, have trouble paying attention, lose all willpower because willpower is actually a thinking brain function that gets degraded during stress. We're much more likely to give into our emotions or our cravings.

We're also likely to do like I did for many years of my life—power through. We override our body's limits. We compartmentalize our emotions, push our pain to the side. Aspects of our culture value this, but it doesn't work long term because stuff comes out sideways, usually in our physical health. We're also more likely to have stress and emotion drive our decisions and lead us to self-medicate our distress with substances or with adrenaline-seeking behavior, violent behavior or self-harming behavior. Even if our window has been narrowed, and Lord knows mine was, we can widen our window. We always have choice in where we're directing our attention, how we are resonating with our environment.

**THE WAR CRY:** Given your research, what does the latest research tell us about the nature and extent of trauma PTSD?

**DR. STANLEY:** There's been a confluence in the last 20 years, in part because we've had these very long wars that the United States has been engaged in, and there have been many troops coming home with PTSD. There's also been, I think, a lot more awareness of the effects of trauma after sexual violence and the effects of trauma on children. But in the United States, we still collectively have a tendency to disown trauma. Trauma happens when what I call our survival brain—the parts of our brain operating unconsciously and constantly assessing the environment around us and our inner environment—assesses us to feel helpless, powerless or like we are lacking control during a period of stress. Future events that contain triggers or cues related to that traumatic event lead us to recall that previous event, and we act out accordingly to the present situation.

Once we've experienced trauma, our minds and bodies begin to act in ways that we consciously don't understand. But there are neurobiological reasons why it's happening, and we can heal from it.

**THE WAR CRY:** You write about applying wisdom and courage along with self-discipline in dealing with stress and trauma. Why do you consider these traits essential?

**DR. STANLEY:** I come from a long warrior lineage. I'm the ninth person, ninth generation, in my family to serve in the US Army. My sister and I are the first two women to serve in the Stanley lineage in the US Army. As a child, I watched the effects of unresolved, unhealed, combat trauma in my grandfather and my father. Because of this, I did a lot of research into the warrior traditions. The one thing that was common for all of them was

that they had practices that involved mind-body training. The goal of the training was to cultivate wisdom and courage.

Warriors are in very challenging situations, often dire circumstances, where the ability to access wisdom and courage moment to moment has life-or-death impact. Wisdom is the ability to pay attention and know where the attention is directed and to use that information and see it clearly—not how we want it to be, not how it should be, but how it really is—and then be able to act on that unvarnished assessment of the information to cause the least harm and promote the greatest good. In MMFT, the two core capacities people cultivate are attentional control, which is that moment to moment manifestation of wisdom and courage.

**THE WAR CRY:** What can you tell us in light of research about our ability to learn new things, to influence our mindset, to improve our self-awareness?

**DR. STANLEY:** We always have this ability to change. If repeated experiences have led us down a deep hole or metaphorical cul-de-sac we don't want to be in anymore, we can choose to begin again. We can interrupt our previous conditioning, our previous choices, and choose something else. We might fall off the wagon, but we can come back on again. We can continue accumulating beneficial experiences and the landscapes of our lives change as a result.

That's the reason I teach. I love to see that what I've learned can be a benefit to others, and to see how the shifts they make have ripple effects for the people around them. That is one of the most amazing things about our social wiring. If we're anxious and angry and ashamed, we're sharing that with everyone. Stress and emotions are contagious and self-regulation and resilience are also contagious. If we're present, if we're self-regulated, if we're resilient, we are conveying that to everyone who crosses our path. That ripple effect can have consequences that extend to our families and our communities. The Salvation Army creates such positive ripple effects. ■

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Hear how **Elizabeth Stanley** has dealt with severe trauma in her own life and an in-depth discussion of her research on the Fight For Good podcast. Visit [elizabeth-stanley.com](https://elizabeth-stanley.com) where you can join the mailing list, download the five-minute audio-guided instructions for contact points and find links to enroll in the entire online training course.

\*Ed. note: Spiritual practices and disciplines followed by The Salvation Army as part of the universal Christian Church are primary habits that are hallmarks of Salvation Army mission and ministry. They point to Jesus of Nazareth, God in flesh, the Savior for the world, who said: "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).